STORY BY
SYOUGO
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ART BY
TOMOSESHUNSAKU
CLASSROOM
OF THE
ELITE
NOVEL
7

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CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE
NOVEL 7

YAMADA ALBERT
The muscle of Class C. Follows Ryuuen's every command.
KANEDA SATORU
An academically gifted Class C student. Acts as the class's advisor.
SHIINA HIYORI
A Class C student who loves books, is a bit of an airhead, and doesn't show much emotion.
"Thank you for going out with me today, Sakayanagi-san."
"Oh, no, no. The pleasure's mine."
Turning, I spotted a rather unusual pair: Ichinose and Sakayanagi. Ichinose, noticing our group, raised her hand and waved.

"Do you remember the baptism you had received at your previous school?"
"N-No...!"
She covered her ears, trembling as if she were a little girl afraid of ghosts.
"Come on, we're just getting started."

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CLASSROOM OF THE ELITE

NOVEL 7

STORY BY

Syougo Kinugasa

ART BY

Tomoseshunsaku

Seven Seas Entertainment

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Art by Tomoseshunsaku

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Chapter 1:
Ryuuen Kakeru's Soliloquy

IT WAS SOON AFTER STARTING elementary school that I realized I was abnormal.

I found a large snake on a class field trip. I wasn't afraid of being bitten. Some students watched with great interest from a safe distance, some were scared, and still others couldn't care less. Most, however, wanted the snake to die. Even the adults panicked, crying out for someone to help.

So, I grabbed a big rock and bashed in the snake's head. I might have gotten bit, but I wasn't afraid of that.

My classmates screamed, and the teachers were in a panic. I didn't really care. I wasn't trying to be a hero by destroying the snake everyone feared; I just didn't see the need to be afraid of it.

I learned something about myself that day.

The moment an enemy succumbs, I feel a huge rush of adrenaline. Fear and pleasure are two sides of the same coin to me; violence rules the world, and the effectiveness of your own particular brand of violence determines what you accomplish. The snake's death was my first unshakeable victory, and the sight of its flattened corpse gave me such pleasure.

The fact remains, however, that people are hostile toward those they sense are different from them. I've had many enemies since that day, both internal and external.

Even so, I was never afraid. All I thought about was how to get revenge, and how to turn the tables on my enemies. Eventually, they would all bow to me. Those who possess an unparalleled capacity for violence are truly the elite.

There was just one problem, and it grew as I did. It became increasingly difficult for me to feel pleasure.

I was bored. Bored because no one could fulfill my dearest wish—to be overthrown.

Perhaps I'd only meet my match in death.

ADVANCED NURTURING HIGH SCHOOL DATABASE DATE: 7/1

NAME:	Amikura Mako
CLASS:	First Year, Class B
STUDENT ID:	S01T004741
CLUB AFFILIATIONS:	None
DATE OF BIRTH:	October 2nd

EVALUATION

ACADEMIC ABILITY:	C
INTELLIGENCE:	C+
DECISION MAKING:	D
PHYSICAL ABILITY:	C
COOPERATIVENESS:	B+

COMMENTS FROM THE INTERVIEWER

She's a serious, earnest girl. One of her best qualities is her cooperativeness, a trait we hope she'll continue to develop.

NOTES FROM HOMEROOM INSTRUCTOR

She's always cheerful. She spends most of her time with Ichinose-san and her group, and seems close to them. Even when things are rough, she supports her friends and they support her.

Chapter 2:
The Sound of Footsteps in the Middle of Winter

WE WERE HALFWAY THROUGH December, and it was suddenly freezing cold. More and more students donned scarves, gloves, and long socks. Clouds hung low in the sky. It looked like it was going to snow.

Come to think of it, I'd never seen snow before. I'd watched it on television and read about it in books, but never touched it, never felt the sensation of it on my skin. I decided I'd like to experience it.

Yukimura Keisei, Hasebe Haruka, Sakura Airi, and myself—all members of Class D—met up at Keyaki Mall after class. (Keisei's real name was "Teruhiko," but we'd started calling him Keisei in accordance with his wishes.) Their faces were becoming a familiar sight to me. We'd grown close of late, and now met regularly just to talk, without any specific purpose in mind.

Sometimes we hung out for over two hours, and other times, we split after only thirty minutes. They were a casual, easygoing group who came and went as they pleased. We did often hang out together after class on Fridays, because our currently absent fifth group member, Miyake Akito, had a situation to contend with.

"I really thought Class C would've tried something else by now. Those questions they gave us weren't easy at all," said Keisei, just as some Class C girls happened to pass by.

"Class C doesn't seem any more capable of studying than us," Haruka answered, eyes on her phone. "Miyacchi says he'll be here soon. Sounds like he just left his club."

She was texting the very person we were waiting on. Akito was the only group member who belonged to a club, and couldn't hang out with us immediately after class.

"But it's good that we made it through this exam, isn't it? Besides, I don't want to see someone expelled, even if they're from another class," said Airi. She didn't have the stomach for cruelty.

"Well, yeah. I get that you want to get along, but that's kind of hard, with how this school is designed. Rising in the ranks means

kicking another class down," said Haruka.

"Exactly," said Keisei, sounding impressed. "I understand what you mean, Airi, but it's eat or be eaten at this school. I don't want us to be eaten."

"I suppose," Airi replied, disheartened.

"Well, wait a minute. What if, after the final exam, all four classes had the exact same number of class points? Then everyone could graduate from Class A… Just kidding. That'll never happen," said Haruka.

"I think that'd be wonderful, though," said Airi.

"Unfortunately, it's impossible," said Keisei.

"How can you be sure?"

"I've heard the upperclassmen talk about it. If all the classes happened to have equal points after the final exam, the school would hold an additional special exam to determine our rankings," he said.

"What kind of exam?"

"Who knows? I've only heard rumors. Apparently, it's never happened before."

"I still think it's an interesting idea, though," said Haruka.

"So, only one class can be A in the end, huh?" asked Akito, arriving to join us.

"Hey, Miyacchi. How did practice go today?" asked Haruka.

"How did what go?"

"You know. How did you handle your bow or whatever?"

"Like normal. Not really great, not really bad. You don't have to pretend to be interested," said Akito.

"Come on, isn't it nice to ask? We're just having a casual conversation between friends, right?"

"Well, do you know anything about archery?" asked Akito. He sat down, looking somewhat suspicious of Haruka.

"You just hit the target with your bow, right?"

"No…but I guess you have the general idea. Just forget about it."

"Well, how do I put this? It's not like I have any interest in

archery myself. I never have. I just want to know what youthful missteps led *you* to care about it, you know?" replied Haruka.

"Yeah. Come to think of it, why archery? It's not like this school's archery club is legendary or anything, right?" asked Keisei.

"Back in junior high, an upperclassman I was friends with belonged to the archery club. So, I thought I'd give it a shot. That's all there was to it. No particularly deep reason," said Akito.

"Ah, so this other student made you want to join?" Airi chimed in more and more often these days. It was a welcome sight, if a surprising one.

"Airi, you have a digital camera, right? That's a fad these days, huh? I suppose I understand why you prefer something like photography," said Haruka.

"What, like posting pictures to Instagram and stuff? That's more of a girls' hobby, I guess. I don't quite get it," said Keisei. He sounded critical.

"Hey, that's sexist," said Haruka. "There're lots of dudes on the 'gram these days, you know."

"Really? I don't think it's a good idea to make your personal information public like that."

"What about you, Kiyotaka? Are you into photography?"

"No. I don't know anything about it," I replied.

After all, at this school, you couldn't communicate with the outside world at all. The only people who'd see you on social media would be other students.

"Kiyopon doesn't really look the type. Actually, if he used Instagram, I'd be super surprised. Are you secretly the sort of person who impulsively snaps a photo when you're out partying, or at the pool at night?" Haruka asked me. "Or when you have an ice cream in hand and make, like, a cute face… You ever do anything like that?"

"No." I didn't want her to picture me doing anything of the sort. "Do you use it, then? Instagram?"

"Not at all. It's a pain, and I don't like putting myself on display," she replied.

"I'm with you," said Keisei.

Airi was quiet, but she looked hurt by their dismissal. Although she was taking a break from it at the moment, her hobby was posing for pictures and uploading them to the internet.

“Well, it’s pretty popular worldwide. It’s not that strange a hobby,” I said. I didn’t want to depress Airi. She probably intended to hide her true feelings, but it was obvious that she cared what I said. She always reacted when I helped her, and Haruka and the others immediately noticed it, too.

“Well, I’m not the person to ask about what’s cool these days. I apologize to anyone who happens to like Instagram and stuff like that,” said Haruka.

“Just because it’s not for me doesn’t mean I should dismiss something other people like out of hand. That’s on me. I didn’t think it through,” Keisei apologized to Airi.

Airi patted her chest and breathed a sigh of relief.

“Sorry to change the topic, but I was wondering about something,” said Akito as the discussion calmed down. He sounded slightly irritated. “Doesn’t Class C seem strange lately?”

“Class C? They’re always strange. What’re you talking about?” Haruka tilted her head to the side.

I knew what Akito referred to. He was describing the people who’d followed us over the past few days. Even now, one watched us from his hiding place: Komiya, a Class C student and one of Ryuuen’s henchmen. He was undoubtedly monitoring our group, but sat just far enough away to be able to deny it as a coincidence. We would risk being labeled the aggressors if we confronted him. Akito understood that we still didn’t have any solid proof.

More importantly, another person was currently watching our group. Someone Akito hadn’t noticed yet.

“During our study sessions, those Class C students came over and messed with us, right?” he asked.

“You mean Ryuuen-kun and Shiina-san? It’s them again?”

“Well, they sent different people this time around. Komiya and Ishizaki showed up today at archery club. They said they came to observe, which the upperclassmen readily accepted. But they just glared at me the entire time,” said Akito.

So, Komiya was following Akito, then? Ishizaki was probably no longer accompanying him to avoid getting too conspicuous. Of all of us, Akito was clearly the most bothered by Ryuuen's surveillance.

"Maybe they're interested in the club?" asked Airi, who couldn't possibly know Ryuuen's plots.

"That'd be nice if it were true. But it doesn't seem like it," said Akito. He rotated his arms, as if his shoulders were stiff.

Ryuuen was continuing to pressure us, and lately, he'd turned up the heat. I could almost hear his bold laughter, hear him say, "Sooner or later, you'll give way."

"Did they do anything to you? Like heckle you, or sneeze to distract you when you were shooting? Or throw rocks at you?" asked Haruka.

"They couldn't do anything of the sort in front of the coaches or senior students, obviously. They left around the time practice ended," said Akito.

Although nothing had really changed for me personally, Ryuuen and his cronies had clearly marked us since the last exam. I had to assume they marked Karuizawa, too. They'd probably narrowed down their list to a few prime suspects by now—and I was sure that included me. One final piece of decisive evidence would lead them to conclude that I was the one they were after, and Karuizawa Kei could give them that evidence.

The fact that Ryuuen was treading lightly was proof that he thought about this very carefully. How would he go about finding his puzzle's final pieces? If I examined his movements thus far, it wasn't hard to guess what he might do. It was a matter of "when," not "if."

As I pondered that, Akito and the others continued talking. Keisei offered his thoughts about why Class C was bothering us.

"Maybe it has something to do with Class D's growth. We had zero points shortly after we started school, but now we're within arm's reach of Class C. Factor in the Paper Shuffle test's results, and there's a chance we might overtake Class C by our third semester. They should be panicking," he reasoned.

"You're right. We're going to overtake them. Us, the same people they've been making fun of!"

“But…that shouldn’t be possible, right?” asked Airi, clearly thinking back to when our class point totals were announced.

“Correct,” Keisei said. “When the school announced the class point totals at the start of December, Class D had 262 points, and Class C had 542. There was a 280-point gap.”

Class D had faced off against Class C in the Paper Shuffle, and won decisively. One hundred points were transferred from C to D, letting us close the gap by two hundred points total. The difference between Class D and Class C was now a measly eighty points.

Class C was currently in the lead. However, something unrelated to the exam was brewing in Class C.

“It seems that Class C did something to severely violate the rules. The school’s keeping the details hush-hush, but Class C had a hundred points docked.”

“I wonder what they did? Sounds like a very Class C thing, though.” Haruka seemed amused…not that Class D had any room to talk. We’d managed to lose a thousand class points within a month of starting school.

“Well, whatever the reason, their internal conflict’s doing some real damage. If things continue this way, our class might be promoted after winter vacation,” Keisei said, though he didn’t sound cocky.

“Is that why Class C started messing with Miyacchi?” asked Haruka.

“I think it’s likely,” Keisei replied.

From Ryuuen’s perspective as Class C’s leader, being demoted had to suck. He was probably looking for a weakness in Class D that he could exploit to help him maintain his position. At least, that was consistent with his previous actions.

“Classes trading places, disruptive as it may be, is inevitable given the way the school works. But I think it’s also something that doesn’t happen often. Class D’s growth after its initial severe fall has to be making Class C panic. It’s only natural that they want to ascertain the reason for our growth.”

“Ryuuen-kun acts all high and mighty, but he’s still their leader. His reputation’s gonna hit rock-bottom if we overtake them.”

“I suppose I understand his desperation,” said Akito, sounding

pleased by the thought of Ryuuen's pride taking a hit.

"Still…Class D hasn't really changed *that* much, has it? I mean, we closed the gap, but why? Is it because Class C fumbled?"

It was certainly true that most of the students in our class simply faced the exams they were presented with, oblivious to the battles that went on behind the scenes. It was understandable that they wouldn't know exactly why the gap between our classes had shrunk.

"We beat all the other classes during the island exam. Ryuuen defeated us on the zodiac test, but we made a comeback in the Paper Shuffle. Meanwhile, Class C have been using their class points willy-nilly, haven't they?" Keisei pointed out. "Even on the uninhabited island test, they quickly used up all the points available to them."

"So, in other words… C Class is self-destructing?"

"You could see it like that. Their recent rule violation was certainly self-destructive."

The special exam on the uninhabited island had been conducted right at the start of our summer vacation. Each class had been allocated 300 points for their own use during the exam, and we had to use those points we were given over a period of one week to clear the test. Then, whatever points we had remaining were added to our class point total after the exam ended. Each class, D included, did everything they could to have at least one point remaining, but like Haruka had said, C Class had quickly spent all 300 points they had.

"Is that why D Class was able to close the gap by that much?"

Even though there were certainly many twists and turns along the way for D Class, we had successfully managed to save 225 points.

"That's probably it. Besides, I have to wonder if Class C even did anything to try and counter us. It did look like they really enjoyed their vacation, though. I might be a little bit jealous that they didn't really know what we had to endure."

"Ryuuen's just reckless. He's an idiotic child who thinks that doing the unexpected somehow makes him cool. That's why it doesn't mean anything to him if his class loses."

From Keisei's fiercely logical perspective, spending class points haphazardly must've seemed completely incomprehensible. However, Ryuuen hadn't wasted the points he received. He hadn't just used all his

points, either—he'd also handed all of Class C's stuff over to Class A during the island challenge, including their toilets, tents, and excess rations. He certainly didn't do that out of the goodness of his heart. Intangible properties like trust or friendship meant nothing to Ryuuen; if he'd helped Class A, it was because he got something in exchange, most likely private points.

There were only a few students who knew the truth. And Keisei seemed like he belonged to the group of people who didn't know.

"Wow, must be nice to be a boy," said Haruka. "You guys have it so easy. Don't you think so, Airi?"

"Y-yeah. A lot of the girls had it *real bad* on the island during *that* time of the month. If it had gone on much longer, I think I might've been in trouble too," Airi whispered, her cheeks red.

"Why would you have been in trouble if the test continued?" asked Keisei, who clearly didn't know the first thing about how women's bodies worked.

"W-well, that's…" Airi, unable to tell him anything about the time of the month all girls went through, averted her eyes.

"You know what, Yukimuu? It's cute how dumb you can be, but you really need to know when to shut up. Get it?" Haruka shot back scathingly at Keisei.

"What do you mean?"

Desperate for this to end, Akito gently tapped Keisei on the shoulder. "People have a lot of problems, dude," he said.

"I don't have a single clue what you're getting at. What do you mean, 'a lot of problems'?" Keisei, ever the dogged pursuer of knowledge, was desperate to uncover what he was missing.

Akito changed the subject. "Class D won because Horikita saw through Ryuuen's strategy, right?" He looked to me for acknowledgement.

I nodded. "If she hadn't done that, we would've lost."

"All Class C did was party. They pretended they had to retire, but why did Ryuuen-kun stay on the island? He's their leader. Shouldn't they have left someone less conspicuous behind?" Haruka's reasoning wasn't totally off-base, but anyone could've been nominated as leader for the purposes of that test. There had been no way to rule out the

possibility of another, more inconspicuous Class C student hiding in the shadows.

"Hey, Kiyotaka, tell us the information you got from Horikita," said Keisei, a serious expression on his face.

"What're you talking about?"

"What's Ryuuen thinking and planning? After everything that happened during the sports festival and Paper Shuffle, we really need to work together as a class from now on."

"I agree. It really creeps me out, being followed by Ishizaki and those guys," said Akito.

It seemed they were starting to realize that cooperation was more important now than ever before. Even Akito and Haruka, who didn't normally pay much attention to our class's problems, seemed to be on board.

"I can only tell you what I've heard secondhand, but…" I started.

I wanted to suggest calling Horikita, but Keisei spoke up. "That's fine. Just tell us what you know," he said.

The four of them stared at me. It was a lot of pressure. "All right. Well, don't blame me if I get something wrong."

With that disclaimer out of the way, I explained what had happened on the island, starting from the very beginning. The moves I described were mine, of course, but the official story credited them to Horikita.

I told them how Ryuuen had used a radio to communicate with a spy while he hid somewhere on the island. About how, in addition to Ibuki, other spies had infiltrated the other classes. About how Ryuuen had been obsessed with Horikita ever since the exam on the cruise ship. I told them about the strategy Ryuuen used on the ship, and how he won, but I hid the fact that he'd planned to crush Horikita in the sports festival. I said nothing about Kushida's betrayal, either.

"That's generally how it went down. It's not really any different from what you guys already know, Keisei," I told them.

Keisei crossed his arms, seemingly deep in thought. "Then, like Haruka said, why did Ryuuen stay behind on the island?" he asked.

"Horikita thinks it's because Ryuuen doesn't trust anyone," I said.

“That seems as if it’s the likeliest answer. I mean, gathering intel on other classes while learning their leaders’ identities probably seemed like too important a job for him to trust another student with, right?”

You would’ve had to issue commands to your spy, exercise deductive reasoning, and have the endurance to survive on the island for a few days with only the bare necessities. Though I didn’t say that part aloud, it also had to be someone who had a connection with A Class and could work with them. It wasn’t far-fetched to think that Ryuuen was the only person in Class C capable of pulling it off.

If the leaders had been nominated after everyone had gathered, then Ryuuen would probably have had a different strategy. However, the manual that was distributed out to us on the uninhabited island clearly stated that the nominations would be held immediately after our roll call on the final day. In other words, it was done before each class had assembled. Ryuuen probably went with that strategy he did because he saw that.

Keisei and the others mulled it over.

“Just as I’ve come to expect of Horikita. I could never think that far ahead.”

“We had all that trouble with rations and sanitation, someone burned our manual, and someone’s underwear even got stolen. Class D was in complete shambles. We didn’t have the time or energy to conduct reconnaissance on other classes,” said Akito.

“It was pretty bad, wasn’t it?”

“Horikita-san is amazing.”

“She really is. To think she figured out all that stuff,” said Airi, sounding genuinely impressed.

“Considering how she saw through Ryuuen-kun’s strategy, I understand why they have it out for her.”

“In fact, it looks like they’re still trying to get in our way, even now.” Rather than deny it, I decided to just tell them how things were.

“It seemed like there was some kind of dispute between people in the same group during the zodiac test, too.”

“I suppose I can understand what happened on the island and the cruise ship. But why come all the way to spy on me during archery club? That’s not normal, right?” asked Akito.

He had a point. If Horikita was Class C's main target, why waste time tailing all of us?

"They might be trying to find weak links in Class D," I said. "After all, it doesn't seem like Horikita has any weaknesses they can exploit. Maybe their plan is to destroy those around her."

"I suppose."

"Wow, Kiyopon's girlfriend is really incredible," teased Haruka.

"Don't call her my girlfriend."

"Y-yeah. I think that's rude to Kiyotaka-kun," said Airi.

"Ah ha ha! Sorry, sorry."

It was also frankly insulting to Horikita to pair her up with someone like me. Sudou would blow his top if he even heard Haruka joke about it.

"Even if she isn't your girlfriend, don't you like her?" asked Haruka. "Or have you already got a girlfriend?"

"I don't really like her, and I don't have a girlfriend."

"I see. Then I guess that settles it. We're all going to be lonely this year."

"Lonely?"

"Look around. It's almost Christmas, isn't it?" Haruka whispered. She had a point. The mall was so festooned with Christmas decorations that it was hard to believe we were on a school campus. Happy couples walked past where we sat.

"It's not that special a day, right?" said Keisei. "It's just like any other."

"That might be the case for *you*, Yukimuu, but it's important to us girls," Haruka replied.

"R-rumors might go around."

"Yeah, yeah. Stuff like who's dating, and who isn't. Or who spent the night together, and who didn't. You know? Even if you're just single because you like being alone, they'll pity you," said Haruka.

"We're first-year high school students. Our priority should be our studies," Keisei insisted.

"What, so you've never, ever thought even a little bit about

dating? You're blushing."

"Shut up."

"This mango juice is *way* too sweet. Whew," said Akito, handing me the cup while pretending to vomit.

"But it's so good!" said Haruka, sounding shocked. "Anyway, I think a bunch of stuff is going to happen in Class D over winter break. Just my two cents."

"You mean like people asking each other out?" Airi inquired.

"Probably. If couples go out, other couples are going to break up. A lot can happen at Christmas, after all." Haruka nodded sagely, as if she'd spent a lot of time observing the battlefield of relationships.

"Putting aside who might start dating, what about who might break up? The only couple in Class D is Hirata and Karuizawa, right?" Akito clutched his throat while talking, as if the mango juice's sweetness was throttling him. It *was* super sweet.

"Love can bloom anywhere, Miyacchi. It's not as though your only romantic options are the people in our class. If there's a girl you like, you gotta make a move before someone snatches her up," said Haruka.

"Sadly, archery is my only love," said Akito.

"Dude, that's so lame. You're not even all that passionate about it. Super uncool."

"Shut up!" he averted his eyes as if embarrassed. "Anyway, I'm not taking time off from club activities during winter break. I suppose it might be a different story if I had a girlfriend, but I don't."

"So, you *would* like to get a girlfriend?" asked Haruka. She mimed holding a microphone up to Akito's mouth.

"I mean, I'm not going to broadcast it to the world like Ike and those other guys, but I imagine both guys and girls want the same things, right?"

"Well, if my ideal guy's out there, I'd love to find him. What'll you do if a girl says she likes you, Yukimuu?" Haruka pressed.

"What'll I do? It'd depend on the relationship I had with that girl, I guess."

"Oh, so you wouldn't date her just because she was cute? I see, I see. You're quite the serious little boy," she teased.

“Knock it off.”

“Kiyotaka-kun, do you have any plans for Ch-Christmas?” asked Airi.

“Whoa, Airi. Does that mean you’re inviting Kiyopon on a date? So bold!” Haruka exclaimed.

“Th-that’s—I mean—that’s not what I mean! I’m not asking that!”

“What else could it be, then? Kiyopon just said that he didn’t have a girlfriend.”

“That’s not what I was getting at. It’s only… I mean… Well, I wanted to know what his plans were. It’s just that I’m curious about what you want to do, when you spend Christmas all alone,” said Airi.

“Hmm, that makes sense. Miyacchi probably has club stuff, but what about you, Yukimuu? What are you up to during Christmas?”

“I’ll be studying,” Keisei answered. “If the school promotes us to Class C in the third semester as planned, we have to switch from climbing the ladder to holding our position. We don’t have all that many academically skilled students in our class, so I’d like to stay ahead.” So, he wanted to contribute his strongest talents to the class. He seemed to have grown more confident after tutoring Haruka and Akito.

“I don’t know how much I can help on the academic front. I’ll leave that to you, Keisei,” Akito said.

“That’s fine, but even if we manage to graduate from Class A, you should try to do better in your studies. Those academic scores will follow you through life.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right. I’ll slide right back down if I start slacking off now.”

“You can’t slack off *and* graduate from Class A, anyway.”

“What about Airi’s question, Kiyopon? Are you going to be alone on Christmas?” Haruka asked.

“Yep. I’m not doing anything special. I’ll probably spend the day quietly in my room.”

“Christmas is just a normal holiday, right?”

The closing ceremony was on December 22nd. Christmas was almost here.

“Heh. Hee hee!” Airi chuckled to herself. She tried frantically to stifle her laughter, but failed.

“Is something funny?” asked Haruka.

“S-sorry. No, it’s just… Well, I’m having fun. I’m having so much fun I started to laugh.”

“You’re laughing because you’re having fun?” Haruka and the others looked as though they couldn’t quite understand. I looked too, noticing tears welling in Airi’s eyes.

“It’s just that I’ve never had such a fun time before. I’m really happy,” she answered, revealing her heart to us.

“Seriously? We’re just talking about stupid stuff.”

“That’s fine with me. I like talking about stupid stuff,” Airi replied.

“Well, I don’t really get it, but I’m glad. I’m having fun too,” Haruka concluded.

Our conversation topic switched again.

“Since we’re all here now, why don’t we grab dinner together before heading back?”

Everyone was down with that. As we started to head out, I spoke up. “Hey, I’m going to use the bathroom quick. You guys mind going on ahead?”

“We’ll just wait here.”

“Nah, it’ll be really crowded at this time of day. It’d probably be faster if you got in line. Save me a seat.”

Convinced, everyone headed toward Keyaki Mall’s restaurant. This was only possible because Airi could now act on her own, to some extent, without me being there.

Komiya, after concluding I was heading to the bathroom, followed them. I watched them leave, then headed in the opposite direction from the bathroom, approaching a girl who’d sat by herself while my group chatted.

“Can I have a minute?” I asked.

The girl was Kamuro, from Class A. She messed with her phone as if she hadn’t noticed my presence.

“Hey, I’m talking to you,” I said again.

“Huh? Me? What?” Her body language told me she’d only just noticed me.

I took a chair next to Kamuro. You could’ve cut the tension in the air with a knife.

“You’ve been following me. What do you want?” I asked.

“Hmm? What’re you talking about?”

“I saw you after class yesterday. Two days ago, at Keyaki Mall. Four days ago, at Keyaki Mall. Six days ago, after class. Seven days ago, after class. You were always there. That’s quite a string of coincidences, isn’t it?” I asked. On my phone’s screen, I showed her several pictures I’d taken of her spying.

“That’s… But when…?”

“You were trying to be discreet, so you couldn’t exactly meet my eyes when I looked in your direction. No wonder you didn’t notice me taking pictures of you.”

“Well, so what if I’m following you? Do you have a problem with that?”

“Not especially. It’s not hurting me or anything. I’m not going to tell you to stop, either.”

“Exactly. This is just a coincidence.”

“But I have to wonder…what will your boss think when she finds out about this?” I asked.

“Boss? What’re you talking about? You’ve been watching way too many movies.”

“Then I suppose I’ll report this to Sakayanagi. I’ll tell her you’re not really very good at tailing me.”

“Wait a minute,” said Kamuro, grabbing my arm as I stood up.

“You’re devoted, aren’t you?” I asked. “To Sakayanagi, I mean. She asked you to tail me day after day, and here you are, still doing your job. You must be close to her.”

“Don’t give me that. I’m nobody’s lackey.”

“There’s really no need for you to lie. You’re spending your precious time doing something as boring as tailing me, and you’re doing

it precisely because you trust and respect Sakayanagi."

"Absolutely not. I'd honestly never speak to her again if I could," Kamuro spat.

"Then why do you follow her orders?"

"Does it matter?"

"If you're not doing it out of goodwill, then it must be because she's got some dirt on you."

"What're you trying to say?"

"I'll report your clumsy efforts to tail me to Sakayanagi. I'll expose your inability to act on her behalf. Then that weakness of yours she's exploiting will probably come back to bite you."

"So, you're threatening me, too?"

"Too," huh? That just about confirmed that Sakayanagi was indeed using some weakness of Kamuro's. She'd fallen hook, line, and sinker for my ploy.

"So, what's your deal?" Kamuro demanded. "Why is Sakayanagi targeting you?"

"Who knows? I honestly have no clue," I said.

"You're the Class D student that Ryuuen's looking for, aren't you? That's the only thing I can think of."

"What're you going to do about it?" I chose not to deny it. If Sakayanagi knew what I was doing, there was no point covering it up.

"You're trying to threaten *me*, but I could give Ryuuen some friendly advice, if I felt like it," Kamuro said.

"So, you're threatening me in return, huh? In that case, how about this?" I decided to make her a proposal. "Feel free to tail me as much as you like. I won't say a word, and I won't rat on you to Sakayanagi. In exchange, I want you to keep quiet. Don't tell anyone other than Sakayanagi what you know about me."

"So, those are your conditions?"

"I don't think it's a bad deal."

"You're right. I have no real interest in helping Ryuuen, either." Kamuro nodded in apparent agreement and stood. "I'm going home now. I'm tired."

With that, she headed for the exit.

“Whatever Sakayanagi has on her is dynamite, I bet,” I muttered to myself.

ADVANCED NURTURING HIGH SCHOOL DATABASE DATE: 7/1

NAME:	Yamada Albert
CLASS:	First Year, Class C
STUDENT ID:	S01T004708
CLUB AFFILIATIONS:	None
DATE OF BIRTH:	January 16th

EVALUATION

ACADEMIC ABILITY:	C–
INTELLIGENCE:	C
DECISION MAKING:	C
PHYSICAL ABILITY:	A
COOPERATIVENESS:	B

COMMENTS FROM THE INTERVIEWER

He appears to be a calm, obedient student of few words, though he's had some trouble with senior students in the past. We hope he'll develop into a fine student, but would like to monitor him closely.

NOTES FROM HOMEROOM INSTRUCTOR

He's fluent in English, and I must praise his dedication to classwork. However, he has considerable room to improve when it comes to math and the Japanese language.

Chapter 3:
Reunions and Farewells

"WHAT'S UP with those guys?!" Sudou grumbled irritably as he walked into our classroom the next day, bypassing his seat and approaching Horikita. The look on his face made it immediately clear that he was extremely pissed off. "Hey. You got a sec, Suzune?"

"What's the matter?" Horikita couldn't exactly ignore him when he cornered her at her desk.

"Those jerks from Class C! That Ryuuen guy and his lackeys. They've been followin' me since this mornin', trying to pick a fight. They even blocked my way in the hall. They're seriously getting on my nerves!"

"You haven't shouted insults or taken swings at them, have you?" asked Horikita. She gave Sudou a slight glare, prompting his immediate answer.

"I didn't, no way. I completely ignored 'em."

"I see. It seems you followed my instructions perfectly, then," replied Horikita.

"What's she talking about? What instructions?" I asked Sudou.

"Oh, Suzune told me that whenever I run into something I can't deal with properly, I should just ignore it," said Sudou. That was certainly sound advice. If Sudou rebuked the Class C students, it would probably only add fuel to the fire, so to speak.

"Well, I guess I did bump their shoulders a little when I forced my way through," he added. "The students from the other classes knew I was boxed in, so there shouldn't be anything to worry about, right?"

"I don't think they'd try anything, no," said Horikita.

They'd already gotten the school and student council involved once before, and it had caused an uproar. If Sudou punched someone, that would be bad, but if he just pushed his way through, it should be fine.

"So, what did they say to you?"

“They called me a monkey, an idiot, childish stuff like that. They were tryin’ to start a fight.” *Smack!* Sudou pounded his fist into his palm. I wondered whether this was a continuation of Class C’s plans, like when they’d appeared at the archery club yesterday.

“Some Class C guys also tailed Akito—I mean, Miyake,” I told Sudou and Horikita.

“Miyake-kun? It seems Class C’s quite active these days,” Horikita replied.

“Do you think they’re plannin’ on staging another fight, like that time they tried to get me in trouble?” asked Sudou.

“Who knows? I can’t say at this point. But I’ll consider countermeasures, just in case. If they happen to approach you again, make sure you don’t get physical,” said Horikita.

“I understand. I ain’t gonna break my promise to you. Even if they start throwin’ punches, I’ll stay calm,” said Sudou.

He sounded much more mature now, and Horikita seemed to believe what he said. After Sudou finished giving his report, he returned satisfied to his seat and casually started a conversation with Ike and Yamauchi.

Watching him, Horikita spoke up. “I wonder if Sudou-kun’s finally become a normal, well-adjusted person,” she mused.

“Yeah,” I replied. “His speech is still a little crude, but that’s fine.”

“It looks like it’s time for him to take the next step.” With that cryptic comment, Horikita got a notebook and started scribbling something down.

“What are you talking about? What next step?” I asked. When I tried to sneak a peek at her writing, Horikita quickly closed the notebook.

“That’s a topic for another time. Besides, we have more problems than just Sudou-kun right now,” she said.

I didn’t know what she meant, and honestly didn’t care. Lately, Horikita had thought and acted independently of me with increasing frequency. She’d gotten better at communicating with Sudou, Hirata, and the others, too.

“At any rate, Ryuuen-kun’s been a busy bee—we only just got

done with the Paper Shuffle," she continued. "I wonder what he's plotting now?"

"There aren't any exams in the immediate future," I said.

"Think back to the time they attacked Sudou-kun. Now, it seems as if Ryuuen-kun's plotting against Ichinose-san and Class B. He apparently likes challenging his enemies when no exams are involved," said Horikita. She shot me a withering look, as if to say, "Don't you already know that?"

I pretended not to notice and shrugged the look off. "I wonder what he's after this time?"

"Do you really not know? Or are you just pretending?" Horikita asked.

"What do you mean?"

"He's looking for the person controlling Class D from behind the scenes."

"In other words, he's looking for you?"

Horikita pinned me with an intense glare. "You can't use me to hide from Ryuuen anymore."

"What makes you say that?"

"If he thought I was the puppet master, so to speak, he would approach me directly. But he hasn't done anything of the sort," said Horikita.

"Perhaps your strategy during the Paper Shuffle was more effective than he expected? He might be moving more carefully this time. Taking a while to remove the obstacles in his way first," I said.

"I wonder. I don't think that's it, though. It's more like he lost interest in me."

"Does this mean you miss Ryuuen's attention?" I asked.

"Does that mean you want me to kick you?"

"I do *not* want to be kicked." She was definitely the kind of person who would actually kick me, too.

"Maybe our class's clandestine leader foolishly called attention to himself? Play dumb if you like, but do you really want to discuss this here and now?" asked Horikita.

It was just before homeroom, and all our classmates, Kushida included, sat at their desks. It didn't seem as if anyone was listening in, but this wasn't a conversation we could risk having overheard.

"At any rate, you apparently understand Ryuuen quite well. I'm not teasing. I mean it," I added quickly, because Horikita glared at me again.

"His modus operandi has remained essentially the same. If he plays the same tricks over and over, I'm going to learn from it, even if I don't like it. That's how I predicted that he'd use Kushida-san during the Paper Shuffle. Of course, it goes without saying that I would've preferred that *not* happen, but…" Horikita trailed off.

No one liked a traitor. Horikita was probably thinking that we wouldn't have had to struggle quite so hard if Kushida hadn't betrayed us.

However, Ryuuen had felt secure precisely because of the internal threat Kushida posed. For better or for worse, Kushida allowed us to see our enemy's attack patterns.

"That wasn't Ryuuen-kun's only miscalculation. I intended to pull the rug out from under him during the Paper Shuffle," Horikita continued.

"Isn't that what actually happened, though?"

"Yes. Honestly, some of Class C's lowest-scoring students should've been expelled, but that doesn't seem to be the case."

If you could get your hands on a complete set of questions and answers, then there was no need to study. Horikita was saying it wouldn't have been surprising for some students from Class C to be kicked out of school after having let their guard down. Keisei and the others seemed to think the same thing.

"Class C must have some smart people, right? Students acting in support roles for their classmates, unlike Ryuuen," I replied.

"I suppose so. If they're putting in that much effort, they're doing a good job," said Horikita. "At any rate, I imagine his tricks will only escalate from here."

"That's not my problem. It's yours."

"I know that. Being your decoy seems to be my fate in life."

“You sound surprisingly accepting.”

“Because I have no choice but to accept it. It’s not like you’re going to quit now, are you?”

This optimism wasn’t a bad thing. Horikita was perceptive. She had quite a lot of potential. If she improved her communication skills to Hirata’s level, she could stand among the ranks of the elite.

“So, what’s your plan?” asked Horikita.

“For what?”

“Do you have a strategy to counter Ryuuen-kun’s hunt to expose you?”

“Nope.”

“There you go again.” She huffed, looking irritated. “Let’s change the topic. Are you still participating in those meetings?”

“Meetings? You mean, with Keisei and the others? Is there some kind of problem?”

“I can’t imagine there’s much benefit to being in *that* clique. That study group formed specifically to help Hasebe-san and Miyake-kun in certain subjects, correct? Now that the exam’s over, it’s no longer necessary.”

“It’s not about necessity. I just feel at ease when I’m with them,” I answered. Horikita’s life revolved around her quest to ascend to Class A. It was all she ever talked about. Since I didn’t share her enthusiasm on that front, I had little reason to hang out with her the way I did with Keisei and the others.

If Horikita ever came to talk to me about something that wasn’t a class problem, then maybe, I could engage with her the same way I did with Keisei and the others.

“Will you cooperate with me?” asked Horikita.

“I will. As much as I can,” I answered.

She didn’t look very convinced.

3.1

OUR LAST MORNING CLASS ended, and it was lunchtime. As I pondered meeting up with Akito and Keisei, Horikita stared at me.

"What? Did you want to continue our talk from this morning?" I asked.

"No. I have a request."

"If it's a hassle, I'm going to pass."

"It shouldn't take much time." Horikita reached into her bag and took out a library book. "Didn't you say last week that you wanted to read this?"

"*Farewell, My Lovely*, huh?" A masterpiece by Raymond Chandler. I'd been interested in it for a while now, but the book seemed strangely popular, because it was always checked out. I'd given up on borrowing it. "I'm impressed that you managed to snag it from the library. Are you offering to lend it to me?"

Technically, Horikita should've returned it so it could go to the next person on the waiting list. But this seemed like the most reliable method of getting my hands on it, underhanded though it may have been.

"If you'd like. It's also due back today. I was hoping you could take it to the library for me, then check it out for yourself," said Horikita.

"Is this because you don't want to go to the trouble of returning it?" I asked.

"Even if I returned it myself, you'd still need to go to the library to borrow it. From a purely efficient standpoint, this is the correct course of action," she replied.

True enough. This just saved Horikita the time and effort of having to return the book herself. You needed a student ID card when you wanted to check out a book, so trying to check out a book in someone else's name would be impossible. On the other hand, you didn't need to present anything if you were simply returning a book.

“If you refuse, I’ll just head over to the library. I don’t know when you’ll be able to get your hands on this incredibly popular book that’s in such short supply, though.”

I wondered whether this was Horikita’s warped way of showing kindness, since she knew I wanted to read the book.

“Fine. I’ll take it,” I told her.

“Thank you.” Horikita handed it to me. “I don’t care when you return it, as long as it’s sometime today. If I hear that it’s overdue, I’ll be coming for you.”

“I know.” I hadn’t borrowed a book from the library before, but I understood the process. If a book was overdue, private points were deducted from your account. “Well, there’s no time like the present. I’ll just go now.”

3.2

THE LIBRARY WAS surprisingly empty at lunch, like a cozy little hideaway. Students weren't allowed to eat in here, so only a few people were around, guaranteeing that the return process would go smoothly.

"Since I'm already here, I might as well check out another book," I muttered to myself.

Farewell, My Lovely in one hand, I walked over to the mystery section, hoping to find another of Raymond Chandler's works. As I arrived there, I saw a lone female student struggling to grab a book on a high shelf. It was *Wuthering Heights,* by Emily Brontë. A masterpiece penned by the middle of the three Brontë sisters, all of whom were literary legends.

A conventional blurb could make that book sound like a mystery, but wouldn't it have fit better in the romance section?

Wuthering Heights was perched at a strange angle, just barely within reach, which might be why the girl wasn't using the stepstool. I stood in front of her and grabbed the book.

"Sorry, I don't mean to butt in, but…" I looked at her and trailed off. "Wait a minute. You're from Class C. You're…"

Shiina Hiyori. I'd seen her with Ryuuen a short while ago. It seemed that she recognized me, too.

"You're Ayanokouji-kun, right?" she asked.

"Yeah. Uh, here you go," I said, handing her the book.

"Thank you very much."

“Do you like her work? Brontë?” I asked.

“I don’t really like or dislike the book. It was in the wrong section, so I thought I’d return it to its proper place,” she replied.

“I see.”

“By the way, that book you have—*Farewell, My Lovely*, right? It’s wonderful,” said Shiina. Her eyes started to sparkle.

“I managed to borrow it from a friend of mine today.”

“Wow, that’s lucky. It seems as though Raymond Chandler’s quite popular among the second-year students. I’ve been wanting to reread it myself, but I wasn’t able to find a copy today.”

“I guess it was bad of me to borrow it from a friend,” I said apologetically.

“It’s all right. I’ve already read it. Besides, I was fortunate enough to find another good book while I searched for that one. The school library’s quite large. If I tried to read everything on its shelves, I’d probably graduate before I could finish,” said Shiina. She clutched Brontë’s book, a small smile on her face.

“Yeah. You’re probably right. Sorry for disturbing you, by the way.”

She’d come here during the lunch break instead of eating, so she probably didn’t want to waste time chatting to a student from another class. I decided to leave her be.

“If you just came to return *Farewell, My Lovely* and then borrow it for yourself, you could’ve done that at the service desk. Are you looking for another book to check out?” Shiina asked, stopping me in my tracks.

“I thought I’d come back and try another time, so…” I replied. Shiina was already scanning the mystery section. “Hey, what are you doing?” I asked.

“Have you already read Dorothy L. Sayers?” she asked.

“No. I’ve read Christie, but not Sayers.”

“In that case, I would most definitely recommend *Whose Body?* That’s the first book in the series featuring Lord Peter. If you read that book, you’ll inevitably want to read the rest.” She pulled several books from the shelves and handed them to me.

“Uh…” Her behavior left me puzzled. I struggled to figure out how to respond.

“I’m sorry, I was rambling. Am I bothering you?”

“No,” I told her. “I was just a little surprised. Since I’m already here, I might as well grab some more books.”

“Sure.” Shiina looked extraordinarily happy. She smiled so widely that her eyes scrunched up. “The lunch break isn’t over, right? Would you like to eat with me?”

“Huh?”

This was even more bizarre than a book recommendation. It was probably safe to assume that Ryuuen had told Shiina to ask me this. Still, whether I accepted her invitation or not, her impression of me was unlikely to change. I’d make sure that she saw me as neutral and unreadable.

“No one in Class C likes reading, so I don’t really have anyone to talk to,” she added. Perhaps the silence was getting awkward.

“Won’t this cause trouble?” I asked. “Class C is currently hunting someone in Class D, right? I feel like I’m on the list of suspects.”

Shiina had probably heard that either Keisei or I were likely candidates for the person pulling Horikita’s strings. It was very likely that was why she was trying to talk to me now.

In some ways, Shiina Hiyori was even creepier than Ryuuen. She was a completely unknown quantity. I might be able to extract some information about her by using Karuizawa, but that was too risky, now that Karuizawa was Ryuuen’s target. Keisei, Haruka, and Horikita, of course, were all poor spies. I could try to use Hirata, but he was fundamentally neutral.

“Please don’t worry. I just play along so that Ryuuen doesn’t bother me. I’ve never been interested in conflict. Or is it that you think talking with me will be a problem on its own?” Shiina asked.

“No, not really. I have no personal issues with you.”

“I’m glad. I wouldn’t want our classes to clash over something so trivial. I’d prefer we all get along,” she said.

“Clash,” huh? Considering that this school was designed to foster competition, her hopes were doomed to failure. Still, most students

acted as if this were a normal high school. Hirata and Kushida, for instance, were popular because they showed no favoritism in how they interacted with classmates.

“Well, should we go? Time is wasting,” said Shiina.

“Let me head to the service desk and take care of these first,” I replied.

Who could’ve predicted this would all result from a simple library visit?

3.3

SHIINA AND I made our way to the cafeteria. It was twenty minutes into our lunch break, and the room was packed. Most students were eating, though, so hardly anyone was in line to get a meal ticket. I chose the daily special, but Shiina seemed unable to come to a decision. Her finger hovered over the buttons, and she looked at all the options carefully.

"Sorry, sorry…" she said. I waited another two minutes. Finally, she ended up choosing the same meal I had. "Sorry. I'm so indecisive."

"No worries. It's not like there was anyone in line behind us."

After we turned in our tickets, two meals were placed on the counter. Shiina struggled to adjust her schoolbag to take her tray.

"Your bag's in the way," I said. "Here, let me."

"Oh no, I couldn't bother you with it…"

"Don't worry about it. You don't want to fall and drop your tray."

"Sorry." She handed over her bag, which turned out to be quite heavy. Did she carry all her textbooks in it? "It's a lot, isn't it? Thank you very much."

We avoided the crowds, found some empty seats, and sat across from one another, slowly tucking into our late lunch.

"Do you usually eat in the cafeteria?" I asked.

"No. I usually buy lunch from the convenience store in the morning and then eat in the classroom. Do you come here often, Ayanokouji-kun?"

"Convenience store food isn't my favorite. Food tastes best when it's freshly made."

Shiina used her chopsticks to elegantly raise a morsel of food to her mouth. I watched her in admiration. She handled her chopsticks with such grace.

"Hmm, I see. The cafeteria food certainly is delicious, isn't it? I'll keep that in mind," she replied.

“This isn’t your first time eating here, is it?”

“Looks like I’ve been found out.”

“I was thinking that that might be the case, since you struggled to choose at the ticket machine.” We were at the end of our second semester. It was rare to see a student who’d never used the cafeteria.

“I’ve always wanted to try it, but if you miss out on your initial chance to do something, you kind of drag your feet, don’t you? I figured this was a good chance to go,” Shiina said.

I understood those feelings. You didn’t want to let people see that you didn’t know how to do something they could do, after all. Pride made you cautious, like when I was reluctant to buy drip coffee at the convenience store.

“Does that mean you’ll come here again?” I asked.

“Yes.”

Shiina and I continued to talk while we finished our lunches. Since we’d come in late, most other students finished and left before us. A few hung back to chat idly, or to take their time savoring their food.

Shiina placed her bag on the table with a *thunk*. “I think I’ll head back to the library. Have you read any of these before, Ayanokouji-kun?”

William Irish, Ellery Queen, Lawrence Block, and Isaac Asimov. “Wow. You’ve got good taste.”

“You know them?”

“Yeah. I like mystery novels.”

“Is that so?” Shiina laughed and clapped her hands.

I suddenly realized that there was something off about the books. “Wait. These aren’t from the library, are they?”

“They’re from my personal collection. I’ve been walking around with them, hoping I’d meet someone who shared my tastes and would want to borrow them. I started out just carrying one, but I suppose I accumulated more and more books while waiting to find that certain someone,” Shiina explained.

“Is that so?” This girl was definitely…odd.

“Please, don’t hold back. Take whichever you’d like.”

“Well… I suppose I’ll check out Ellery Queen, since I haven’t read any of his.”

“Go ahead.”

If Shiina was acting, this was quite the performance. I got the feeling she just genuinely loved books. I’d made a strange connection in a rather strange place. I would remain wary, of course, just in case this was a Class C plot, but it really felt like a coincidence. After I promised to return the books, the bell rang, signaling the end of our lunch break.

3.4

AFTER CLASSES FINISHED, I got the customary ping from my group chat.

Come to Keyaki Mall if you can. Usual spot. A casual, chatty message from Haruka.

The moment I started typing a response, Horikita aimed some sharp words at me. “That grin’s really creeping me out.”

“Whose?”

“Yours. You do have *some* degree of self-awareness without me having to deliberately point it out to you, right?”

“I absolutely wasn’t grinning.” I had no memory of the corners of my mouth curling up.

“Are you playing dumb again? I’m talking about your *inner* self,” said Horikita. Apparently, she smelled my joy like a bloodhound. “You’ve found a cozy little nook, haven’t you?”

With that, she grabbed her bag and stormed off to the dorms by herself.

“I was grinning, huh?” I muttered.

Of course, it felt good to be contacted by a friend. Still, shouldn’t Horikita be glad about that?

Did she really want us to continue being loners?

I got ready and left the classroom. Most groups would’ve met up there and then headed over to Keyaki Mall together, but we were all too lackadaisical for that. When I arrived at our usual hangout, the rest of the group was already there.

“Akito, don’t you have club stuff?”

“I’m skipping today.”

“Looks like those Class C dudes showed up at archery again. It doesn’t seem like they threw punches or got into any fights, though.”

“I told the seniors I felt distracted, so I was going to take today

off. The club's pretty lenient," Akito explained. That was pretty blunt. I supposed that he wouldn't have been able to come meet us here if he'd lied and said he was feeling ill.

"What if we tried talking to the teacher?" Haruka suggested.

Akito simply shook his head. "There's nothing the teacher can really do. If Class C trespassed in our private places, that'd be one thing, but they're free to observe the archery club," he explained.

"Ugh. Class C really are annoying, aren't they? Oh, speaking of. I saw it. I saw it. How *deplorable* of you, good sir," said Haruka, speaking like some old-timey aristocrat as she jabbed me with her elbow.

"Saw what?" I asked.

"What do you mean, 'what'? I'm saying that I saw you eating with Shiina-san from Class C, Kiyopon! Airi's so worried about it, she's been spilling rice all over herself."

"Wah! You promised that you wouldn't say anything, Haruka-chan!" Airi wailed.

"Oh, did I?" said Haruka. "Then, Kiyopon, pretend I never said anything."

Well, that wasn't exactly possible, but now I understood what was really going on.

"Don't tell me you're about to rush into a last-minute romance right before Christmas?" Haruka demanded.

"Really, Kiyotaka? I didn't think you were that kind of guy," said Keisei, sounding slightly annoyed.

"Naïve. Much too naïve, Yukimuu. All roads lead to romance in the end. Young people these days live life at a much faster pace," said Haruka.

"Faster? What do you mean, faster?" replied Keisei. "We're in our first year of high school."

"Look, if you experience your first love or whatever in high school, you're already behind the curve. Back in elementary school, some of my classmates were already dating junior high or high school students."

Keisei's mouth hung open. "I-I've never heard of anything like that before."

“That just means you never paid attention, Yukimuu. I mean, most girls aren’t interested in childish boys,” said Haruka.

Wasn’t it normal for elementary school kids to be childish? At any rate, I had to correct this immediately. “Sorry to rain on your parade, but there’s nothing going on,” I told them.

“Really? You’re not just saying that to hide your embarrassment?”

“S-see?” said Airi. “I told you, but you wouldn’t believe me, Haruka-chan.”

“I had some business to take care of at the library, so I went during lunch. I just happened to run into Shiina there. I think she was spying on me, like Ishizaki and those guys at Akito’s club. She asked me a bunch of questions. If I flat-out turned her down, it would’ve attracted extra attention,” I told them, trying to lend my story more credibility. Besides, it wasn’t really a lie. Even though Shiina and I met by accident, it was likely that she’d been scoping me out.

“So, you’ve been marked too, Ayanokouji. Does that Ryuuen dude hate the thought of losing to Class D that much?” asked Akito. He sounded a bit resentful, like it made him less special that he wasn’t the only person Class C targeted.

However, Keisei considered things from another point of view. “That might not be the case. You heard the rumor going around that we’ve got a master schemer hiding in Class D, right? Maybe that’s why Ryuuen’s been tailing us. Ayanokouji, what kind of questions did Shiina ask you?”

“A bunch of different things, but she did ask about the mastermind,” I answered.

“I-I see. So, it wasn’t a date or anything.” Airi patted her chest and sighed in relief.

“I couldn’t really think of anything to say, so I didn’t answer. To be honest, it wasn’t a lot of fun,” I added.

“Even so, it looked like you had a pretty good time,” said Haruka. “Hmm.”

“I couldn’t just let her see me looking disgusted, right? She’s still a Class C student.”

Haruka seemed suspicious, but Keisei changed the topic. “Putting aside Haruka’s imaginary romance, Class C is becoming a problem. I

feel bad for eavesdropping, but apparently Sudou got wrapped up in something and went to Horikita for advice."

Ah, so Keisei overheard their conversation this morning.

"Are you all right, Keisei?" Akito asked.

Keisei looked deep in thought. "Nothing's happened to me so far, but I'm still worried. I've seen Class C students around a lot lately, and they're all Ryuuen's lackeys. I'm probably being targeted as well."

"I see. They haven't done anything to me, though," said Airi, raising her hand timidly.

"Me neither," said Haruka, raising her hand like Airi.

"Well, maybe someone's been watching us, and we just haven't noticed it yet," Airi replied.

"Eh? What, like a stalker? Creepy."

Of course, a guy tailing girls might lead to various problems. Ryuuen might be using girls to act on his behalf.

"Watching us, huh? Maybe…" Akito brought his hand to his mouth, as if he'd just thought of something. "I usually finish up with club stuff and meet you guys kind of late, right?"

"Yeah. Generally after six or seven, I think."

"There're usually an awful lot of Class C students around, considering the time. When I met up with you guys the other day at Keyaki Mall, Komiya was there. He's here today, too," said Akito.

Akito was the quick-witted one in our group. His observational skills were sharp. Haruka tried to look around, being extremely obvious about it, but he stopped her.

"Don't. We don't know what they're after. It's better not to react," he said.

If Akito hadn't stopped Haruka, I would've. It'd be best to avoid adding fuel to the fire right now.

"Gross," spat Haruka, looking at Komiya and not disguising her disgust at all. "So, it's really true about there being a secret Class D mastermind?"

"We don't know whether or not that person exists," said Akito. "Ryuuen spews lies as easily as breathing."

However, Keisei thought in a different way. “Ryuuen has people following us precisely because he believes that there *is* such a person. But if Class D contains a master manipulator, like Ryuuen says, who could it be?”

“What? You think this person exists?”

“If they don’t, then what Class C is doing makes no sense.”

Akito didn’t seem entirely convinced. “That’s assuming that there’s any rhyme or reason to Ryuuen’s thinking,” he countered.

“What do you think, Kiyopon?”

“Putting aside whether or not the Class D mastermind exists, that’s probably why Class C is tailing us,” I answered.

Haruka crossed her arms. “So, we’re talking about someone who isn’t Horikita-san, and who’s helped us through all the exams so far? Like Yukimuu, maybe? He’s smart. As a matter of fact, he’s always top of the class on our tests.”

“It’s not me. All I did was help out during the island test and the zodiac game.” Keisei let out a deep sigh, as if he found the subject irritating.

“In that case, how about Kouenji-kun?” Haruka suggested. “I mean, his personality’s, well…off. He’s brilliant, he’s athletic, he’s perfect in every way.”

“Impossible,” replied Keisei. “Like you said, he’s a jerk. Do you really think he’d do anything for our class?”

“Maybe it’s an act?” asked Haruka.

“You mean, his ridiculous personality’s just a front?”

“Maybe he’s really a cold, calculating schemer. You think?”

Everyone shook their heads.

“Absolutely not,” said Akito. “He’s nuts.”

“Besides, Kouenji retired on the very first day of the island test,” added Keisei confidently. “He wouldn’t have known what was going on with us. If there was another mastermind on that island aside from Horikita, it couldn’t have been him.”

“Oh ho, I see. You’re pretty persuasive, Yukimuu.”

“But this is all conjecture based on the assumption that there

really *is* a mastermind, like Ryuuen believes. Even if there is, we're not sure they were involved in *all* the tests."

"I see. Yeah, you're right."

"But I *do* think the mastermind exists," Keisei added.

"Why do you say that?" Akito asked.

"Just a feeling. I guess it's because of Class D's rapid progress."

"But how could Ryuuen-kun know for sure that the mastermind isn't Horikita-san?"

"Maybe Hirata-kun's the mastermind?" suggested Keisei. "Back when we were on the island, he got some advice from Horikita-san, I think."

"So, Hirata's the one giving the orders?" Akito asked.

"I don't see him as the type, but it's not impossible."

"It definitely sounds like he's on Ryuuen's list."

"I think Ryuuen's got his eyes on about ten people."

Someone from Class C was probably tailing Hirata, too. But he was bound to remain neutral and abstain from conflict, and I barely spoke to him lately. I wouldn't risk it while Ryuuen and his goons were on the hunt.

"H-hey, Kiyotaka-kun?" Airi timidly spoke up.

"Hmm?"

"Please don't be upset, but I wanted to ask you something," she said. "Is it possible that maybe *you're* the mastermind?"

The other group members all looked at me simultaneously.

"Why do you think that?" I asked.

"W-well, it's just…you're calm, and smart, and…reliable, so… I thought that you gave Horikita-san all kinds of helpful advice, so…" Airi stammered.

"Does Kiyopon get good test scores?" asked Haruka.

"If I recall, not great, not bad," said Keisei, pushing his glasses up.

"S-sorry. It's just, well, I kind of thought that, for some reason or another. Maybe because of the advice you gave, that Ryuuen-kun might be after you. I felt bad for you…" Airi continued.

I supposed it was just her nature to ask an honest question. I doubted she meant ill. “Unfortunately, I’m the one always *getting* advice from Horikita.”

“Well, I guess Kiyopon does have a mysterious quality, you know? Also, since he’s close to Horikita-san, it’s reasonable that you’d suspect something,” Haruka told Airi.

“Come to think of it, that might be right. It might be why Shiina directly confronted him,” offered Akito.

“It certainly seems reasonable to be suspicious of Ayanokouji. Even if there isn’t really a mastermind, just being close to Horikita might make people think that he’s the one.”

“If that’s true, it’s bad news for you, Kiyopon,” said Haruka.

“Yeah, it really is.”

“What a drag. Hey, if they give you trouble, feel free to talk to us about it,” said Akito, placing his hand on my shoulder.

“Yeah. I’ll do that,” I told him.

This surveillance couldn’t continue forever. When he saw his opportunity, Ryuuen would definitely choose to attack.

3.5

AN UNEXPECTED PERSON approached me after class the next day: Satou from Class D. Her skirt fluttered slightly in the breeze as she stopped in front of me.

"Hey, Ayanokouji-kun. Are you free today? If so, would you like to have some tea or something before going back to the dorms?" She twirled her hair on her finger, as if it were pasta on a fork. She was bold—and obviously looking for a date.

Horikita, who sat next to me, didn't seem to care at all. After gathering her things, she left the classroom. However, I felt the other members of the Ayanokouji Group observing. *Why's a popular girl like Satou talking to Ayanokouji?* they likely wondered. Haruka seemed deeply interested.

"Well…"

I didn't really have any plans. Hanging out with our group wasn't mandatory, so they wouldn't mind. I was a little worried about the way they were staring, though.

"Is this a bad time?" Satou sounded slightly anxious.

"Sorry, Satou. Today's not so good for me," I replied.

It was a tough decision, but I turned her down—mainly due to the source of my discomfort all day. My shoulders were tense thanks to that person constantly staring at me. Her eyes remained fixed on me even now, as I talked to Satou.

Chabashira-sensei was still in the classroom. She pretended to deal with paperwork, but she was faking. She was undoubtedly waiting to approach me.

"I-I see," said Satou. "Well, talk to you later, Ayanokouji-kun."

I felt bad for making Satou sad, but this was just terrible timing. I exited the classroom as if I was walking her out, and as soon as I did, Chabashira-sensei followed me into the hall. Clearly, I was correct to think that she had some business with me.

I took care to avoid the main hallway, instead heading over to the

stairs.

Once we had privacy, Chabashira-sensei called out to me. “Ayanokouji.”

“Do you want something?” I asked.

“Yes. Follow me. We need to talk.”

“That’s going to be difficult. I promised Horikita I’d meet her,” I answered, coming up with an appropriate-sounding lie.

“As a teacher, I don’t want to be careless. But circumstances being what they are, this is necessary.” Chabashira-sensei, who was usually inhumanly composed, wore a strangely vulnerable expression.

“I have a bad feeling about this,” I said.

“Unfortunately, you can’t refuse. This is extremely urgent,” she replied.

Resistance was futile. I decided to follow her, and we moved from the student area to an even more private location.

“Why are we headed over here?” I asked. “It’s too early to counsel me on my post-high school career, isn’t it?”

“You’ll understand soon.”

I tried to lighten things up with a joke, but it didn’t seem like she was going to answer a student’s question. However, rather than what was on the other side of the door, what I was worried about right now was Chabashira-sensei. She sounded almost flustered, and that worried me. She was normally so composed. Whoever she was taking me to see —even if it was the person I imagined—this wasn’t normal behavior for her.

She knocked on an office door. “Principal, I’ve brought Ayanokouji Kiyotaka-kun.”

I heard a gentle voice that carried the dignity of age. “Enter.”

Chabashira-sensei opened the door. A man of about sixty sat on the sofa. He was certainly the school’s principal; I’d seen him multiple times before, at the entrance ceremony and during the end-of-the-semester ceremony. He didn’t look calm, either. In fact, sweat trickled down his forehead.

One other person was there, sitting opposite the principal.

I now knew the reason I'd been called here.

"You two may talk now," said the principal. "I trust this is acceptable?"

"Of course."

"Very well. I'll take my leave now. Excuse me," the principal said. He bowed out humbly, despite the fact that the person sitting opposite him was only in his forties.

"I'll excuse myself as well." Chabashira-sensei bowed graciously to the man and left with the principal. The final look she gave me was visibly nervous. As the door closed, the only sound I heard was the heating system's faint whirring.

As I stood completely still and silent, the man spat out his first words. "How about you take a seat? I came all the way here to meet with you, after all."

It had been one year—no, a year and a half since I'd heard this man's voice. His way of speaking and tone hadn't changed at all.

"I'm not planning to have a long conversation. I promised some friends I'd meet them."

"Friends? Don't make me laugh. There's no way you're capable of making friends," the man sneered. Typical. He just assumed that was true, even though he hadn't seen me in so long.

"Whether we talk or not, it won't change anything."

"Then I assume you're going to do as I say. No need to discuss anything; I'm busy anyway."

"I don't know what you want from me," I said.

He cut straight to the heart of the matter. "I've prepared the documents necessary for you to drop out. I spoke to the principal about it. All I need is for you to say yes."

"I have no reason to drop out," I told him.

"For you, that might be true. But I have my own reasons."

He looked right at me for the first time. The sharp gleam in his eye hadn't faded. If anything, it'd only grown sharper. His gaze was a blade, threatening to slice to the very heart of you. I was sure that gaze had wounded many people.

“Does a parent have the right to ruin their child’s life for the sake of their own selfishness?” I asked.

“Parent? You’ve never recognized me as your parent before,” he countered.

“You’re certainly right.” I doubted that this man had ever regarded me as his own child. In truth, we only recognized each other as father and son in the most technical way possible.

“The fact is that you’ve been behaving selfishly. I ordered you to remain on standby,” the man declared, no longer urging me to sit. “You defied me and enrolled at this school. It’s only natural that I tell you to drop out immediately.”

“Your orders are absolute inside the White Room. But outside it, there’s no need for me to do as you say. Right?” I countered.

It was simple logic. Of course, he wasn’t convinced.

“You’ve become quite talkative in the short time since we last met. I suppose that’s due to this absurd school’s influence, hmm?” The man rested his chin on his hand, looking at me as if I were less than filth.

“Answer my previous question, hmm?” I said.

“You mean the pointless query about no longer needing to obey my orders? You’re my property. A man may do as he wishes with his property. Whether I keep you alive or kill you is up to me,” he answered coldly. That he could say such things in a law-abiding country, and mean them, spoke to what a fearsome force he was.

“Badger me all you like. I’m not dropping out,” I told him.

We could keep going back and forth on this, but it didn’t matter. We weren’t going to agree. He knew that, and hated wasting his time on pointless conversations. So, what would he do?

Of course, he prepared his next attack.

“Don’t you wonder how Matsuo’s doing? The person who told you about this school and gave you the idea to enroll?”

“Not especially.” I remembered Matsuo. His face immediately popped up in my mind.

“I hired him to manage you for a year in his capacity as a butler, but he chose to go against his employer.”

He said it in one breath, without pausing, then stopped cold after the word “employer,” a pause designed to etch that final word into the listener’s heart. The tone of his voice and the dramatic pause indicated that a conversation of grave importance was about to begin. His dark look was designed to make me fearful. To cause me to wonder just how bad things were about to get.

“He told you about this school as a way for you to escape my

control. You ignored your real father's wishes and selfishly enrolled without my permission. Truly foolish." He picked up his tea and took a sip. "An outrageous, unforgiveable act. Naturally, Matsuo had to be punished."

It wasn't a threat. He was merely stating the truth.

"You can probably guess what I'm about to say," he continued, "but he was disciplined and dismissed."

"If he went against his employer, that's an appropriate punishment," I said.

My butler, Matsuo, was nearly sixty years old. He was exceptionally good at taking care of people, and quite amicable. Any child would've liked him.

Matsuo married young, but hadn't been blessed with children right away. He was over forty when he had his first baby, but sadly lost his wife in childbirth. His son was about my age, and Matsuo's pride and joy. I'd never met the boy myself, but Matsuo said his son studied diligently every day so that he could achieve great things and repay his father's sacrifices. His smile as he said those words still burned in my memory.

"You know about him, I assume. Matsuo's son, his pride and joy."

He'd predicted my train of thought. He saw right through me.

"When you enrolled at this school, Matsuo's son also managed to pass the difficult entrance exam for a wonderful, prestigious private high school. He worked exceptionally hard, and achieved it all on his own."

He paused.

"But now he's been expelled."

His meaning was plain. He'd forced the school to rescind the boy's acceptance as a form of payback. That was the sort of power he wielded.

"So? For a man like you, that's a mild punishment," I replied sarcastically.

"Matsuo's son was strong. Even though he was expelled from the school on which he'd pinned his hopes, his determination didn't fade. He bounced back and immediately tried to enroll in other schools. I did

whatever was necessary to crush his attempts to advance. I made him give up. I did the same to Matsuo, too. I tarnished his reputation, leaving him unable to find a job. His son also lost his way, and is now unemployed," said the man.

Matsuo and his son had lost everything because of my selfishness. The man before me wasn't making this up. Every word he said was almost certainly true.

If he came all this way to spout this nonsense at me, then he was in for a disappointment.

"I imagine you're not surprised by any of this. Because Matsuo acted against me, it was necessary that I repay him in kind. However, it seemed that this was more than he could bear. He was always a nice, conscientious man, who lost his wife young and raised his son alone. Racked with guilt for having robbed his child of a future, Matsuo concluded that there was only one way to save him. He begged me to leave the boy alone, and committed suicide last month by self-immolation."

So, that was what he came here to say. That my selfish actions led to a man's death.

"Right now, his son's working part-time, earning enough to live on and nothing else, with no guarantee of a future. No dreams. No hope. His family's tragedy is your fault. The boy must surely bear a deep grudge against you. Even in death, he won't forgive you."

The corners of the man's mouth curved slightly upward in a despicable grin.

"The man who took care of you, who saved you, has died. And you show no reaction whatsoever. If Matsuo could see you now, he'd be full of regret."

What kind of joke was this?

Dead people felt no regret. The man before me was the reason why Matsuo and his son lost everything—why Matsuo killed himself—and he wasn't even trying to make me feel guilty. He was simply stating the fact that he had no mercy for those who angered him. That was what he wanted to convey to me.

"First of all, there's no evidence that what you say is the truth," I argued.

“Matsuo’s death has already been recorded. If necessary, I can send for the papers confirming it.” He was basically daring me to ask for them.

“If he really is dead, then that’s all the more reason for me to stay in school. Matsuo helped me enroll, even though he knew you’d punish him. I must honor his wishes.” A ridiculous reply for a ridiculous story.

“You’ve changed quite a bit, Kiyotaka.”

I’d always followed his orders before. Well, I followed the White Room’s orders. It had been my entire world. This man’s sole failure was the one year he left me with Matsuo.

“What happened that year? What made you so determined to go to this school?” he asked.

“It’s certainly true that you supplied me with the best possible education,” I told him. “Even though you used methods that must be kept from the public, I can’t deny what the White Room offered. I don’t plan on revealing my past to anyone, nor will I do anything that would endanger you. However, I’m the result of your absolute pursuit of an ideal. That was your mistake.”

I was a first-year high school student. I was only sixteen years old, and already, my knowledge far exceeded what a normal person could learn in a lifetime. That was precisely what allowed me to recognize the infinite bounds of human curiosity.

“You taught us all kinds of things. Not just the liberal arts and sciences, but martial arts and self-defense techniques, and bits of worldly wisdom too numerous to mention. Learning fascinated me. I wanted to learn about the common, everyday world that you deemed worthless and turned your back on,” I continued.

“Is that what led you to run away?”

“Do you think I could learn what I have at this school if I stayed with you? What’s freedom? What does it mean to be unconstrained? I couldn’t have learned that in the White Room,” I replied.

That part alone was something even he couldn’t deny. The White Room might have been the most efficient facility for nurturing and training someone in the entire world, but you couldn’t learn everything about the world there. It was a facility that cut away anything it deemed unnecessary. To the extreme.

“Matsuo told me that this school was the only place in Japan where you couldn’t reach me.” If I hadn’t chosen this school, but just waited as instructed, or chosen another option, I would probably have been put back in the White Room again. I was absolutely not going to drop out.

“I don’t entirely understand, but it seems that I have no choice but to accept. I suppose that temporarily suspending the facility’s activity was a mistake. To think that a plan sixteen years in the making could be ruined in just a year…” he replied.

The White Room’s temporary shutdown would be a hard blow to this man. But if he was finally contacting me after more than six months, something else was likely happening behind the scenes.

“I understand why you’re here,” he continued. “But if you think the matter is settled, you’re naïve. As with Matsuo’s son, I can force you to quit.”

“I can’t imagine you’ll be able to do anything, considering that the government backs this school,” I told him.

“That’s a statement made without proof.”

“Firstly, I don’t see any of the bodyguards who normally follow you everywhere. You shouldn’t be without them, since so many people hold grudges against you. But your bodyguards aren’t in this room, nor are they in the hallway,” I countered.

The man swallowed his remaining lukewarm tea. “There’s no need to bring a bodyguard along to visit a high school.”

“That’d be sloppy, considering that you’re the sort who has guards escort him to the bathroom. No, you couldn’t bring them here even if you wanted to. The authorities didn’t allow it.” If he hadn’t obeyed, they wouldn’t have permitted him to enter.

“You still lack proof.”

“Secondly, if you had the power to simply force my expulsion, you would’ve done so immediately. But you didn’t. You came all the way here to try to convince me to drop out. Something’s off.”

He hadn’t met directly with Matsuo’s son. He just brought the hammer down on him, so to speak.

“One more thing. You could easily consider this school enemy territory. If you took aggressive action here, and the public found out,

your dreams of making a comeback would disappear forever, wouldn't they?"

"Did Matsuo put that idea in your head? Even in death, he's still impeding me."

"I couldn't possibly deduce all that from things Matsuo said." I'd heard no details from Matsuo, but I could easily guess what was going on. "Putting aside the facility's temporary suspension, there's another problem you never considered. No matter how perfectly you train someone, sooner or later, a rebellious phase occurs."

A mere fifteen years of education couldn't possibly go against the ancient traditions in our DNA. Adolescent rebellion was ingrained in us all.

"Why would someone like you veer off your path? You were taught from the very beginning that there was no point learning unnecessary things."

"Because of my insatiable curiosity, my inquisitive spirit. And also, because I want to decide my path for myself. It's that simple," I replied.

"Utter nonsense. The only path in this world is the one I prepared for you. You will one day surpass me, and become the person who guides Japan into the future. Why can't you understand that?"

"That's just a story you tell yourself."

"It seems I can't get through to you."

"Looks like we agree on that point."

Our statements only went in circles, not intersecting. We'd never see eye to eye.

"The White Room has resumed operations. This time, my plans are perfect. Nothing will get in the way. I'm prepared to make up for lost time," he said.

"In that case, you must have quite a few candidates to succeed you. Why fixate on me?"

"It's certainly true that things are going well. However, there's no one who exhibits the talent level you do."

"Am I to assume a parent can't lie to their own child?"

"This is the last thing I'll say to you, Kiyotaka. Consider very

carefully before answering me. Which would you prefer? To run away from this school of your own free will, or to have your parent force you to leave?"

This man was determined to drag me back there. I didn't know what measures he expected to take, but I didn't want to listen.

"You have no plans to return?" he concluded after a long, deadly silence.

"I don't know if there's any help for a man like you, but I have no intention of giving up. This school *is* developing its students' talents, even if it goes about it differently from you. I expect to learn a lot here," I told him.

"How foolish. This school's nothing more than a barn full of common rabble. I'm sure that your own class holds many such worthless bottom-feeders with no hope of salvation."

"Worthless bottom-feeders? Not at all. This is a place where I may discover whether human beings are made equal or not. I find that quite interesting."

"You think that even incompetent morons can stand toe-to-toe with geniuses?"

"That's what I hope."

"You want to destroy my ideals, then."

"We should end this. We know that, no matter how long we talk, we'll never agree."

Just then, someone knocked at the door. "Please excuse me."

A man in his forties slowly opened the door. His expression was grim at the sight of our unexpected visitor.

"It's been quite some time, Ayanokouji-sensei," he said, bowing low like a subordinate addressing a superior.

"Sakayanagi. Seeing you gives me a rush of nostalgia. It's been, what—seven, eight years?" the man asked.

"I suppose it's been that long since I succeeded my father as school board chairman. Time flies," replied the visitor. Sakayanagi? Like Sakayanagi Arisu, from Class A. "You must be Ayanokouji-sensei's… You're Kiyotaka-kun, are you not? It's nice to meet you."

"We finished speaking, so I'll be heading back."

“Ah, would you mind waiting just a moment longer? I was hoping to speak to you both, Ayanokouji-sensei. Please, have a seat.”

I couldn’t refuse that request from a third-party, let alone the board chairman of the school. I sat down. The chairman sat beside me.

“I already heard from the principal. You intend to make him withdraw from the school, hmm?” Sakayanagi asked the man.

“That’s right. Since it’s what his parent wishes, the school must immediately take appropriate action.”

Chairman Sakayanagi’s eyes met my father’s. “I’m afraid that’s incorrect. It’s certainly true that parents have a significant say in a student’s attendance here, but we must examine the reasons they might wish for their child to drop out. For example, if a student were subject to terrible bullying, we’d certainly take that into account. Are you being bullied, Kiyotaka-kun?”

“Absolutely not.”

“This is a farce. I want him to quit attending a school he enrolled at without his parent’s permission.”

“High school isn’t considered compulsory education, and attendance isn’t mandatory. Students are free to attend any high school of their choosing. If parents paid tuition, it might be a different story, but the government covers all this school’s fees. Our students’ autonomy is our top priority,” said Sakayanagi.

I finally understood what Matsuo meant when he told me, “If you go to this school, you can escape from the White Room.” He’d said that because of Sakayanagi, who now spoke to my father without a hint of cowardice or fear.

Unlike the principal, who groveled before people in positions of authority, Sakayanagi held firm.

“You’ve changed, too. Where did the old, agreeable you go?” my father asked.

“I still respect you, Ayanokouji-sensei. However, it’s precisely because I share my father’s vision for this school that I intend to follow in his footsteps. I’m sure you understand that well. None of these policies have changed since my father’s time.”

“You’re free to succeed your father and carry on his wishes. However, if that’s your intention, then why did you allow Kiyotaka to

enter this school?" the man inquired.

"Why, you ask? Because we determined that he qualified for admission based on his interview and exam results."

"Don't dodge the question. This school's fundamentally unlike ordinary schools. Kiyotaka should never have been a suitable candidate for admission. I know that the interviews and exam are just for show," the man countered.

Chairman Sakayanagi had worn a pleasant smile so far. However, after hearing those words, his expression changed.

"Even though you could say you've retired, you remain an impressive figure, Ayanokouji-sensei. You're quite well-informed," said Sakayanagi.

"He was recommended to this school in secret. The moment that happened, his acceptance was decided. To put it in other words, it's strange that any and all students, no matter who they are, would be disqualified if they don't have a recommendation. Am I wrong?"

It certainly seemed they were discussing some things a student like myself should never have been privy to.

"Kiyotaka never should've been among the possible candidates in the first place. It's abnormal that you didn't disqualify him."

"You're correct that he wasn't originally on the list of students we planned to admit. We normally reject unexpected applications from students not on our list, and we have an interview and exam to camouflage that fact. He's the only student I've approved for admission based solely on my own judgment. You may be here because you wish to take him back, but he's one of our valued students now, and in our care. I have a responsibility to protect this school's students. Even if this request comes from you, I'm afraid I must refuse. As long as Kiyotaka himself doesn't wish to quit, that is," said Sakayanagi, looking in my direction.

"Don't screw with me," spat the man.

However, the chairman continued speaking. "If you still wish us to dismiss him, we'll arrange a three-way discussion with you, Kiyotaka-kun, and a school representative until we reach an agreement."

The chairman had essentially rejected my expulsion. The man had no cards left to play.

“If that’s how things stand, I’ll find another way.”

“What do you intend to do? If it’s anything extreme, then—”

“I understand. I haven’t the slightest intention of putting any pressure on you,” said the man. “You should have no complaints if Kiyotaka’s expelled in accordance with school rules, correct?”

“Yes. I can assure you that the school won’t give him special treatment just because he’s your son,” said Sakayanagi.

“In that case, we’re done talking. If you’ll please excuse me.” The man got up from the sofa.

“When will we meet again?”

“Certainly not here.”

“I’ll see you off.”

“No need.”

I spoke up. “If you call yourself a parent, why not come by the school now and again?”

“Coming to a place like this once is quite enough.” With those cutting words, the man left the office.

“Whew,” said Sakayanagi. “It sure feels like you’re on pins and needles when Ayanokouji-sensei’s around, doesn’t it? You must’ve had a tough time of it.”

“Nah, not really,” I replied.

It was now just the two of us. Chairman Sakayanagi looked at me with kind eyes.

“In truth, I’ve known about you for a long time now,” he said. “I never spoke with you directly, but I had my eye on you. Sensei always spoke highly of you.”

“Ah, so that’s how that mechanism was removed.”

“Mechanism? What do you mean?”

“Nothing. More importantly, Chairman Sakayanagi, do you know a Class A student who—”

“Arisu, right? She’s my daughter.”

“I see.”

“Oh, but she’s not in Class A just because she’s my daughter. Our

assessments are fair."

"No doubt. I just wanted to ask you something." At least now I understood how she knew me. "I'm curious about what that man—that is, what my father—said earlier."

"About your admittance to this school?"

"Exactly."

"I see. Well, it's as Ayanokouji-sensei said. We only admit students we believe deserve placement. We contact and work with junior high administrators to conduct preliminary nationwide surveys and determine who's qualified. The interview and exam are for appearances' sake. A student might screw around in the interview, or get a zero on the exam, while their admission was already decided. Of course, students from all over the country do apply here, so the tests are a convenient smokescreen," said Sakayanagi.

So even if someone scored a perfect 100 points or performed perfectly in the interview, they'd still be turned away, huh? There was no way a student who got rejected would be able to ascertain the truth, either. That made sense. Poor students like Sudou and Ike, and ones with troubled pasts like Karuizawa and Hirata, had been able to enroll despite their issues. Shining records and academic ability were clearly not all that mattered to this school.

"The moment I decided to admit you, your acceptance was guaranteed. Scoring exactly fifty points on all your written tests had no effect on your success or failure," he continued.

This was an exceptionally peculiar school. I doubted that there was another like it in all of Japan.

"I'm sure both you and Ayanokouji-sensei have questions. You'll come to understand with time. You'll see the nurturing policy we strive for, and the effect we hope it will produce," said Sakayanagi. His voice brimmed with confidence. "I can't tell you more than that. You're a student, and I'm the one running the school, after all."

He probably only told me this much because that man was targeting me.

"As the person in charge, I'll protect my students according to the rules. Do you understand?"

In other words, if I didn't follow the rules, Sakayanagi couldn't

help me. “Of course. I also understand what that man’s going to try to do now. Please excuse me.”

“Very well. Keep doing your best.”

With that, I left the reception office. As I stepped out, I saw Chabashira-sensei some distance away. She’d clearly been waiting for our conversation to end. I gave her a slight bow and tried to walk past, but she walked alongside me, matching my stride.

“How did it go with your father?” she asked.

“It’s pointless to probe me so clumsily. I understand everything,” I told her.

“You understand what, exactly?”

“Almost everything you’ve told me has been a lie, Chabashira-sensei.”

“What are you talking about?” She wasn’t looking me in the eye.

“Chabashira-sensei. Almost everything you’ve told me has been a lie.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’re trying to hide how shaken you are, but it’s obvious just from looking at you,” I told her.

The fact she wasn’t looking me in the eye. Her choice of words. She was trying to conceal her emotions from any outside observer to the best of her ability, but even so, she couldn’t hide her unrest completely.

“That man never contacted you. And he didn’t push you to expel me, either.”

“Umm…no. Your father wanted my cooperation. I’ve been trying to get you expelled.”

It was certainly true that my father was pushing for me to drop out. However, judging from his behavior, and that this was the first time he set foot on school grounds, I was fairly sure he’d never been in contact with a teacher. I didn’t have any solid proof, though.

“Look, stop lying to me. Chairman Sakayanagi told me everything. He informed you about me the minute the school admitted me.”

“The chairman told you?”

I chuckled wryly.

In that moment, Chabashira-sensei understood her mistake. “Ayanokouji, did you trick me?”

“Yes. The chairman said nothing about you, Chabashira-sensei. But your involvement in this matter has become clear.”

The second Sakayanagi said he was aware that I deliberately scored fifty points on all my tests, I'd known for sure.

"Allow me to explain," I continued. "First, I wanted to come to this school. Chairman Sakayanagi knew of me, and acted independently to confirm my enrollment, as well as my assignment to Class D. He put me in Class D because you, Chabashira-sensei, have shown no real drive to rise through the class ranks. At least on the surface. Every other teacher desperately wants to have their class promoted."

I'd attract attention in a high-performing class. Sakayanagi had wanted to put me somewhere I could lay low.

"But Sakayanagi made one mistake. You, a teacher who shows no affection for her class and appears apathetic, secretly desire to reach Class A more than anyone else."

"……" Chabashira-sensei remained silent, probably because she knew she'd lose the argument if she responded carelessly.

There was one more thing I wanted to be certain of.

"You're obsessed with Class A. However, the students the school's assigned you so far have been subpar. That's why you act indifferent, concealing your feelings. Am I wrong?"

She was now totally unable to look me in the eye. "That's just speculation, Ayanokouji."

Her denial had no force behind it.

"Your situation changed because of my arrival. Although many Class D students have various character defects, you did luck out on a few fronts. Horikita, Kouenji, Hirata, and Kushida are all students who, if guided well, have a chance of being promoted to the upper classes. They gave you hope. Your concealed desires began to burn brightly once again… It all makes sense when I think back to Hoshinomiya's comment to you around the time I started school here."

Hoshinomiya, who was an old friend of Chabashira-sensei's, knew her hidden desire to rise to Class A. I remembered her teasing Chabashira-sensei about wanting to "be dominated by a younger man," and how that wasn't possible for her. Maybe she'd actually been implying that Chabashira-sensei was incapable of submitting to authority. That she desired for a lower class to supplant a higher one; the inferiors overthrowing their superiors.

“You want me to be your ticket to Class A. And now the chairman has said he’ll watch over me. Put it all together, and you’re at my mercy. All you can do is stand there and pretend not to hear any the abuse I’m throwing at you right now,” I added. “You’ve been stuck with Class D for an eternity, all the while hankering to rise u to Class A. You can’t pass up on this opportunity. You even decided to lie about being in contact with my father in order to use me. That was the reason why you contacted me, and Horikita was nothing more than a pawn for you to use to that end. However, things aren’t so simple.”

I’d had no desire to excel when I first started at this school. I never intended to aim for Class A. Even though she hadn’t yet known what to do with me, Chabashira-sensei made her first move during the test on the island.

“You knew we had to win when the special exams started, or we’d never catch up to the other classes. You panicked and made up a story to tell me. Desperate times call for desperate measures, I suppose.”

Class D had done pretty well, ever since. But Chabashira-sensei had miscalculated. And now my father had finally contacted the school directly, and all her lies had been laid bare.

“You probably intended to corner me,” I said. “Instead, you’re the one with your back to the wall.”

“I see,” she said. “Your abilities certainly aren’t those of an ordinary first-year high school student. ‘Wise beyond your years’—isn’t that how the saying goes? I guess that describes you pretty well.”

She took a deep breath and nodded. Her shoulders slumped.

“You’re right,” she continued. The composure she’d so struggled to maintain had collapsed. “I never met your father before today. But I really could have you expelled if I wanted to. I could claim you committed a serious violation of the rules. Expulsion is the one thing you absolutely want to avoid, no?”

Really, to do all this and now threaten me more? “So, you’re not giving up on your ambitions?”

“Exactly.”

“Unfortunately for you, you can’t get me expelled.”

“May I ask why you’re so certain?”

I’d allowed myself to appear to grow agitated to ascertain her true

intentions. Now, I calmed down, returning to my usual tone of voice. “The current situation. This year’s Class D is unusual. Compared to years past, we’re doing well. Horikita and the others are getting stronger. They might still reach Class A, even without my help.”

Class D had risen for months. We were on the cusp of overtaking Class C, and if the school expelled one of us now, it would ruin that. This meant Chabashira-sensei’s hands were tied.

“Even if I step down, the fight will continue. You still have reason to hope, Chabashira-sensei, and that means you’re going to leave me be.”

“So even though you know everything now, you’re still done trying to reach Class A?” she asked.

Of course. The teacher who’d tried to manipulate me into aiming for Class A had turned out to have no secret connection to my father at all. I had nothing to fear from her now. Still, I didn’t completely shoot her down. People will cling to the tiniest ember of hope, given the chance.

“At the very least, I think I’m done taking my turn onstage,” I said. “Now, please stay back, stay quiet, and watch me. If you try to manipulate me to the tune of your personal desires again, it’ll only hurt the other students.”

“And if I keep after you? What then?”

“You’ll never see your dream come true. Not a smart choice.”

“Allow me to rephrase the question. Are you so certain that I won’t take you down with me when I *do* lose hope?”

“Not at all. It’s certainly possible that something in the future will devastate our class points. If that happens, and you lose all hope, feel free to come at me.” She wouldn’t stop even if I asked her to. Better to let her do as she pleased. “Just remember that your position as a teacher isn’t rock-solid, either.”

It was an empty threat for now, but it should be at least somewhat effective against Chabashira-sensei, given what she knew. As I walked away, she said nothing, so it seemed as she was out of ammo.

Reuniting with my father wasn’t pleasant, but I’d made some significant progress today. I no longer needed to help reach Class A. No matter what Ryuuen did from here, I didn’t have to get involved for

Class D's sake. And no matter what happened to Karuizawa, it wouldn't hurt Class D.

Of course, my identity would be revealed if Karuizawa were caught or betrayed me, but so what? Even if Ryuuen hunted me down, provided I did nothing else for Class D from this point on, we'd probably still end up winning narrowly. He would achieve nothing.

3.6

AT DUSK, I walked a path lined with trees. I looked up and exhaled. White steam curled from my mouth and vanished into the night sky.

"Cold," I muttered.

Every time I breathed out, that white steam rose into the air. I exhaled and inhaled, over and over again. I tended to forget because of the extremely temperature fluctuations from day to day, but winter was here. Last year around this time, I'd always been indoors.

A girl passed me, shivering in the cold. She chatted happily with someone on her phone.

"Seriously, right when you became student council president, our relationship flatlined, Miyabi. Ah ha ha! Come on. I'm joking, I'm joking. Besides, it's not like I'm angry or anything. But I *am* going to ask you to treat me in celebration, so be prepared!" she said.

Her thighs peeked out from beneath her skirt. Exposed to the winter air, they were probably really cold. I caught the fragrant scent of shampoo on her shoulder-length hair.

"Student council? Sorry, but I'll pass. I'm not interested. Besides, you still haven't settled things with the former student council president, have you, Miyabi? Wait, what? Why are you suddenly confessing your feelings for me? Come on, I know you've made passes at lots of other girls. Well, if you win against President Horikita, *then* I'll consider it, okay? Talk to you later."

I didn't *want* to eavesdrop, but if she was going to talk that loudly, then I couldn't help but overhear to. Based on the contents of her conversation, she was probably a second-year student.

The girl finished her phone call and exhaled deeply, steam escaping her mouth.

"Jeez, that Miyabi. Getting all cocky. Still, that student council president was pretty useless. In the end, Miyabi will win," she said to no one in particular.

I wondered whether she'd noticed me, but she continued walking. However, when she reached the fork in the road where the path split off toward the dormitories for each grade level, her foot slipped and she took a truly impressive tumble to the ground.

"Wah!"

The girl immediately got up and looked around, her face red. That was when she noticed me for the first time, and forced a slightly embarrassed smile. She didn't seem injured at all, and she took off in the direction of the second-year students' dorm.

"So, she really was a second year, huh?" I said to myself.

It seemed students didn't really mingle with those from different grade levels very much at this school, outside of student council or club activities. That was why I hadn't really had any opportunity to commit their faces to memory.

"Must be hard to be a girl in winter," I muttered. Apparently, the school prohibited them from wearing leggings underneath their uniform skirts, which made no sense to me.

This was the first "winter" I'd experienced. It was so chilly. There was a song about a dog that got super excited after seeing snow for the first time, and I understood that feeling now. Was it going to be this exciting every time it snowed?

I let out a deep breath, and thought back on the events of the day. I spoke directly with my father, met Chairman Sakayanagi, and ascertained which of the school's policies were meaningless. Seeing through Chabashira-sensei's lies was a huge gain. This should allow me to make quite a bit of progress.

"Should I stop?"

I'd been careful to remain behind the scenes so far, but if Class D continued to flourish, I wouldn't be able to avoid attracting attention. Ryuuen's scrutiny would intensify, and eventually, his investigation would bear fruit. Though I'd tried to prop Horikita up as the class mastermind, he'd seen through it. Sakayanagi knew about my past, and Ichinose probably had her doubts, too.

If I wanted to turn back, this was my last chance.

Hasty decisions led to ruin, so I needed to consider both options: push forward or retreat. Right now, Ryuuen was my main problem.

I took out my phone and texted a particular person, asking her to contact me as soon as she could. The read receipt showed up immediately after I sent the text, so she must've been back in her dorm already. That was odd. She was usually out with friends at this time of night.

I manually entered the 11-digit phone number and called her.

"Hello?"

The owner of that somewhat listless voice was first-year Class-D student Karuizawa Kei. Unbeknownst to her, she was one of the people Ryuuen had his eye. She also knew that I was the one manipulating Class D from behind the scenes, far more so than Horikita.

Of course, there were plenty of things she didn't know, such as precisely how involved I was or what exactly I'd been doing. If anything, Karuizawa probably considered me an intensely creepy person right now.

"Just wondering what you're up to," I said.

"You're joking, right? You wouldn't call without a reason," she replied.

I'd planned to start off with some small talk, but Karuizawa wasn't having it. "You don't enjoy our conversations?"

"If you don't enjoy them either, that's a dumb question."

"I suppose you're right." She wasn't the Class D girls' leader for no reason. She understood people. "Did Manabe and her friends contact you?"

"No. That's not a problem right now. Is that why you called?" she asked. Rather than surprised, she sounded exasperated.

"It's been quite some time, huh? Guess there's nothing to worry about anymore," I said.

The wind howled, turning my bare face raw from the chill. "You're still outside," said Karuizawa. She probably heard the wind over the phone.

"I'm on my way back to the dorms. Seems like you turned in pretty early today yourself. You're normally out much later than this, aren't you?"

"Even I feel like heading back early sometimes." She sounded a

little standoffish.

"Ah!" I cried, noticing something.

"What?" Karuizawa demanded, thinking that it was directed at her.

"It's nothing," I replied.

At the fork in the road, a red charm lay on the ground where that girl had fallen a little earlier. I wondered whether she dropped it. It might've been better to just leave it, but it would likely snow this evening, soaking the charm. There were no signs that the girl was coming back for it, so I decided to pick it up so I could hand it over to the dorm manager.

"Hey," Karuizawa said. "There's something I wanted to confirm with you, since we're already talking."

"Something you wanted to confirm?" I asked. I picked up the charm and walked toward the second-year students' dormitory.

"You're smart and all, but why don't you let people know? I mean, Class D's pretty much full of morons. If you came forward like Yousuke-kun, people would like you more, right?"

"I'm smart, huh? What makes you think that?"

"What do you mean?"

"There's nothing for you to base that evaluation on, is there? My test scores are pretty average. I don't contribute much in class, either."

"That's not what I'm talking about."

Of course, I knew what Karuizawa wanted to say. I'd recruited her help many times at this point, like while stopping the Idiot Trio from sneaking photos and peeping, and during the incident with Kushida in the Paper Shuffle. It was obvious to Karuizawa that I was more than I seemed.

"It's just that you were open about the things you did, your reputation would improve, wouldn't it? You'd probably even draw the school's attention, just like during the sports festival," she continued, sounding almost excited even though this should have had nothing to do with her.

"You know I'm not the kind of person who wants that, right?"

"Then why are you doing all this? If you didn't want attention,

you could've just hung back."

"That's a very good question." I hadn't *wanted* to do any of this. "Something came up that forced my hand, so I helped Class D. That's all there is to it."

Normally, I'd never reveal that much. But today was special. I was in a good mood.

"I kind of feel like that's a waste," she replied.

"I never intended to take control. Never have and never will," I told her. I needed to make sure Karuizawa was clear on that point. I didn't want people coming to me for help if Class D ran into problems in the future.

"It's you, isn't it? You're the one that Ryuuen's searching for."

Class C's surveillance increased day after day—it wasn't just Sudou and Akito—and rumors had spread well beyond Class D's walls. Talk was going around about how Ryuuen had been defeated by someone in Class D and was now out for revenge. Karuizawa had probably known it was me right away.

"That's kind of related to what I wanted to talk to you about. I wanted to apologize," I told her.

"Apologize?"

"I've been helping Class D so it could earn points. I did so because something compelled me to. But that's no longer the case."

"So what? You're just going to stop helping?"

"Yeah. I'll leave it all to Horikita and Hirata. I don't want the hassle of Ryuuen discovering my identity; I'm done. You've been a great help to me—for instance, that time at karaoke, and getting in touch with Kushida. I've imposed on you quite a lot."

"I see. So, that means I'm finally free, huh? I won't be working with you anymore?"

"That's about right."

Karuizawa had served me better than I could've anticipated. That was also why I could cut her off without hesitation.

"This will probably be the last time I call you," I told her clearly.

"Huh?" Her response was delayed. Maybe she hadn't heard me?

“This is the last time I’ll call you,” I repeated.

She had to have heard me this time.

“It’s only natural, since I don’t need anything from you now. Besides, no one knows that we’ve been talking. It’ll be suspicious if we continue to make pointless contact,” I told her.

“Yeah. I guess. I suppose you’re right,” replied Karuizawa, though it sounded like she was struggling with the words. Something seemed to be bothering her, but I just kept going, selfishly.

“Of course, I’ll help you if you ever need me to. I made a promise, and I’ll honor it. You can contact me if there’s an emergency, but please delete all traces of our conversations. I already deleted your contact information.”

“W-wait a minute. Why are you doing this?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s just…very cold.”

“Well, our relationship has always been cold, hasn’t it?”

If I hadn’t gotten involved in Manabe and her friends’ bullying of Karuizawa, we would probably never have spoken. A gloomy loner like me and a popular girl like her were as different as night and day.

“You hated being used by me, didn’t you?” I asked.

“Well, yes, but…” Karuizawa was stumbling over her words more and more. The stretches of silence were getting longer. Best not to drag this out much longer.

“I think we’re done. Did you have anything you wanted to say?” I asked, pressing her to speak.

“I understand.” She sounded unenthusiastic, but any response was good. Perhaps she’d accepted there was nothing she could do. “So, this is the last time I can talk to you like this, Kiyotaka?”

“Are you reluctant to stop?”

“Of course not.”

“Then there’s no problem.” I said it flatly, without the slightest bit of emotion. Emotion had no place here.

“I guess I’ll hang up then…” Even over the phone, I could tell Karuizawa was in the grip of some strong emotion.

“See you.”

“Ah…” Karuizawa seemed ready to say something, but only silence followed. After a few seconds, I hung up, erased my call history, and put my phone back in my pocket.

Attaching herself to me like a parasite must’ve given Karuizawa some peace of mind. Coldly pushing her away like this had undoubtedly left her very shaken. The anxiety and loneliness I sensed from her on the phone would probably continue to intensify. If Ryuuen came after her when she was like this, then…

It was almost guaranteed that she would crumble.

“Well. I took a few detours, but I’m finally back where I was when I started school, huh?” I said to myself.

Horikita, Karuizawa, Ryuuen, and Sakayanagi were now irrelevant to me. I didn’t care about them. I probably wouldn’t push myself in any tests going forward, either. If there were any loose ends left to tie up, they didn’t matter, though they might require my collaboration.

I gave the red charm to the second-year students’ dorm manager and went home.

3.7

I PICKED UP THE DAMP CLOTH I'd been using to mop up dirt and dust, and threw it in the garbage bag. After washing my hands, I sat on my bed, listening to the creak of the springs.

Since it was December, I decided to use the weekend for some end-of-year cleaning. I wasn't much of a packrat, so it only took about half a day to finish everything. Had I managed to return my room to the pristine condition it was in when I first moved in?

"A clean room's such a great thing," I muttered.

I turned on my teakettle, thinking that I would take a little breather. I was somewhat hesitant about using the sparkling cup I'd just cleaned, but there was no other option. Deciding to sort out my future while the kettle boiled, I took out my phone and accessed the school app, scrolling aimlessly through things like class points and personal balances.

Let's start at the beginning.

Why had I enrolled at this school in the first place? So, I wouldn't have to return to my old environment. It wasn't that I was particularly dissatisfied with the White Room, though it was quite problematic from a human-rights perspective. Still, you could receive the best possible education there, and it was that education that had shaped my personality and abilities.

However, even after my father praised me as his greatest masterpiece, I'd felt a discontentment that I couldn't put into words. Even if I *was* the most superior human specimen that existed… was that really something to be proud of?

It was because I'd lived my life believing there was always something more to learn that I considered learning to be meaningful. So, what happened when there was finally nothing left to learn? Life would be horribly boring, wouldn't it?

Well, to tell the truth, I didn't care about all that.

I needed to consider what I should do from here on out. I had always known that my father would contact me someday. I'd been

prepared for it from the moment Chabashira-sensei insinuated that she would get me expelled, though even then, I'd had my doubts about whether she spoke the truth. If my father really came for me, Chabashira-sensei couldn't stop him. He wasn't the kind of foe someone like a class teacher could thwart.

But, knowing my father, I couldn't be sure. So, I did as she said, putting on the appearance of cooperation, devising strategies to help us rise to Class A.

The kettle started to whistle.

Having come this far, I'd established that Chabashira-sensei's words to me had been full of lies. Ironically, given that it had all revolved around my father, she turned out to have no connection to my father at all. Whatever history or trauma she carried with her had left her transfixed by the idea of making it to Class A, just like Horikita or Keisei… no, if anything, Chabashira Sae was even *more* obsessed with the idea. She would never have the courage to actually expel me.

Initially, I might have thought her actions proof of her willingness to be self-destructive if necessary. Until we closed the gap with the test on the uninhabited island, Class D had been in a pretty bad place. A place that made it hard to cling to hope. Chabashira had mixed lies with the truth to manipulate me, but now, I'd seen through the lies hidden within the truth. With her true colors revealed, she had no power to order me around anymore.

If my goal was to spend three ordinary years at this school—whether that be in Class D or Class A—I had no reason to dig myself in deeper by trying to help the class. People like Ichinose and Sakayanagi had started to take an interest in me, but if I stepped back now, that interest would fade.

The one remaining problem was Ryuuen Kakeru.

If he did figure out that I was Class D's secret mastermind, he might create an uproar by circulating that information. It would have been ideal for my identity to remain completely concealed, though that seemed impossible now. Even if I cut all ties to Karuizawa Kei, we were still bound by an invisible thread. If I left things the way they were now, someday, beyond a shadow of a doubt, Ryuuen would find that thread. Would it take a week? A month? A year?

That uncertainty was what troubled me.

The kettle whistled and shut itself off.

“Guess I’ll have some tea.”

My cabinets overflowed with teabags, since I used to have all kinds of visitors stopping by. I’d amassed an extensive range of supplies, from coffee to black tea to green and roasted tea. Just as I put a black tea bag into my cup, someone buzzed me from the first floor.

A classmate would just have rung my doorbell. Who could this be? I went to check the screen and found myself looking at a surprising face. I could’ve pretended not to be home, but I opted for honesty. After all, this was someone I’d been thinking about going to see myself, and he’d come all the way out here.

“I’d like a moment of your time. Or should I come back later?” my visitor asked through the intercom.

“Nah, now’s a good time,” I replied.

It was Horikita’s older brother, who’d been student council president until recently. What an unusual visitor. I buzzed him into the building, and poured boiling water into my cup while I waited.

Soon after, the doorbell rang.

“I’d prefer to speak privately, so please come in,” I told him.

“I agree.”

If Horikita saw her brother and I chatting in the hallway, she’d cause a fuss. Besides, I wanted to avoid being seen with the former student council president as much as possible. I let Horikita’s older brother into my room.

The older Horikita noticed my tea as soon as he entered. “I just thought I’d make myself something to drink,” I told him.

“For a first year, you keep your room quite clean,” he said.

“I just don’t have that much stuff.” I decided not to tell him that I’d cleaned my room today. Of course, he probably deduced as much from the garbage bag full of damp paper towels. “To come all the way to the first years’ dorm… Do you have business with me, former student council president?”

“The second semester ends next week. My time at this school is running out.”

True. He had a little over two months left. It’d be over in the blink

of an eye.

“There’s something I wanted to tell you before I leave. About Nagumo Miyabi.”

Nagumo Miyabi was a second-year Class A, and the current student council president. I’d only exchanged pleasantries with him at the sports festival, but he seemed like an intense person. Whatever he was, though, it had nothing to do with me.

“I can’t imagine what you have to say to me,” I replied. “I’m not part of the student council like Ichinose.”

“I didn’t intend to discuss this with anyone. However, circumstances have changed. I’ve adhered to this school’s traditions because I believe in its system and rules. Nagumo wants to uproot those foundations. Most likely, an unprecedented number of students will be expelled next year.”

Nagumo had yet to take any overt actions, but I supposed it was just a matter of time.

“You were already student council president when Nagumo was a first year, right? Doesn’t that make you responsible for bringing him in?”

“You might say that.” Horikita’s brother made no attempt to deny it. “I made one mistake after joining the student council. I failed in training my successor. Nagumo was the only one I believed had potential, but his ideologies differed from mine. Now, he’s managed to bring almost all the other second-year students under his sway.”

“That’s odd. I understand Nagumo controlling everyone in the second-year Class A, but to the other classes he’d be an enemy, right?”

“He’s already won over the entire school.”

Huh. I didn’t know what this guy was doing, but apparently it was pretty crazy.

“Two first years applied for student council positions this year: Katsuragi and Ichinose. They’re both talented students with a lot of promise, but I decided not to admit them, precisely because of their talent. I was concerned Nagumo would snatch them up. However, Nagumo worked behind my back to establish contact with Ichinose, eventually forcibly adding her to the student council.”

“Why are you giving me all this insider information?”

“If you don’t want to draw attention to yourself, use Suzune as you’ve done in the past. It’ll be fine. I’ll be the bridge between you and the student council,” he told me.

“This is a pretty absurd request. If you were on the student council, your little sister would happily join, but she’s probably not interested now that you’ve stepped down. Besides, irrespective of what Horikita does, I have no wish to get involved.”

I waited a few moments, then took a sip of my tea.

“Traditions change, even the ones you staunchly uphold. That’s just how the passage of time works, isn’t it?” I asked.

There was a lot about this conversation that I still couldn’t grasp, but a picture was beginning to form. Horikita Manabu, now reduced to an ordinary student, wanted to derail the student council’s plans. And he wanted to use me to do it.

“You might be right.” He must’ve known he couldn’t cajole me into helping him, but perhaps the elder Horikita was so desperate he’d swallowed his pride and come here. “Forgive me for bothering you.”

“Would you mind at least giving me your contact information?” I asked.

“What?”

I unplugged my phone from its charger. “I’d like time to think about putting your little sister on the student council and manipulating her behind the scenes.”

“So, you’ll consider it?”

“You came here despite the assumption that I’d refuse, huh? It’d be rude if I didn’t at least think it over,” I said.

My unexpected reversal must’ve surprised the elder Horikita, but he gave me his phone number without asking for anything in return. That alone was proof of how closely he intended to watch Nagumo Miyabi’s student council.

“If I decide to cooperate, I’ll contact you,” I said.

“I expect nothing, but I’ll be waiting.”

Horikita’s brother left my room without taking tea or even sitting down.

“I really don’t think there’s any need to be that hung up on the

student council, though," I said out loud to myself.

Even if I put myself in the shoes of someone who was about to graduate in a couple months…there wasn't much I could do about the situation, here. Still, I was now slightly concerned.

3.8

THE FIRST SNOW of the season arrived late Saturday night. It was just a dusting, and melted at dawn, leaving puddles of water on the concrete. Despite the fact that it'd snowed the day before, the high temperature for the day was seventy-five degrees, close to summer. It was so mild you could even go out in short sleeves.

"So, the second semester's finally going to be over next week, huh? Wow, it's barely felt like any time at all."

On Sunday morning, I went to check how Akito was doing with his club. Then we hung out at Keyaki Mall with the rest of the Ayanokouji Group until evening. We shopped, chatted at the café, got some lunch and hit up a karaoke room. It was a good day, and I enjoyed it doing ordinary things that ordinary students did.

"By the way…ahem. Ah, my throat hurts."

"Singing five songs in a row is really overdoing it, Yukimuu. Still, you're surprisingly good. I was shocked," said Haruka.

"My throat hurts because of the punishment game, not the singing." Keisei scowled at her.

There was a variety of food at the karaoke place, some of which was designed to use in games of chance. For example, the takoyaki came as six pieces, one of which was extremely spicy. Whoever got the spicy one had to sing immediately after eating the whole piece, and additionally, wasn't allowed to drink water until they were done singing. I didn't quite get the point of it, but we all had a blast, so it clearly fulfilled some kind of purpose.

Hilariously, Keisei drew the spicy takoyaki a couple times in a row. We decided to see just how long his streak of bad luck could go, which turned out to be *five* times. The exact probability of that happening was one in 7776.

"So unlucky…"

"On the contrary, doesn't that mean you're really lucky?" asked Haruka. "Think of it like you used up all this year's bad luck at once. You've probably got lots of good stuff awaiting you for the rest of the

year."

"There're only two weeks until the year ends! You did this on purpose, Haruka."

"Sorry, sorry." Haruka clutched her stomach and laughed out loud, but still apologized. "They were really that spicy?"

"I thought I might start breathing fire. I know they said 'spicy,' but there has to be a limit. Come on." Keisei was still sticking his tongue out from the lingering heat.

"Hey, I saved you from the last one. It *was* seriously spicy," said Akito. He'd ended that particular hot streak.

"Let's do this again next time we go to karaoke," said Haruka.

Everyone, Airi included, looked aghast at her proposal.

"Okay, but you might draw the spicy takoyaki, too," I said. "You know that, right?"

"I know, I know. I'm not gonna wimp out after suggesting we all do it again," said Haruka.

"You sound pretty confident in your spice tolerance," I said, trying to probe the apparent confidence she always had on show.

"Ah, have I been found out?"

"I didn't think you were hiding anything…"

"I can even eat super-ultra-spicy ramen without breaking a sweat. I actually kinda like it, you know?" she said.

Well, now I felt like we didn't have a level playing field for this game.

"I wonder whether I can eat that stuff at all?" said Airi, who'd been anxious even before the game started.

"Don't worry, don't worry. If it's too spicy, you can just spit it out. We're not gonna force you to eat anything," said Haruka. Certainly right. Akito and Keisei probably wouldn't force Airi to do anything she didn't want to, either. "Anyway, I already said this about Yukimuu, but you're a good singer, Airi. Was that really your first time at karaoke?"

"Y-yeah. It, um, was really embarrassing, though." Even though she'd been painfully shy, Airi had given it her all.

"If you gave it a little more oomph, it'd be perfect."

We headed back to the dorms. It wasn't even five o'clock yet, but the sun was already setting.

"It was really warm today," said Airi. "Everyone's out in pretty light clothing, huh?"

"You could even walk around in short sleeves this afternoon, so that makes sense."

"I'm not good with the cold," said Haruka, sounding melancholy as she looked up at the sky.

"I don't handle it well, either."

"Well, a little chilliness is good for me. It means I don't sweat during club, which makes practicing easy," said Akito, making him the only member of the group to prefer the cold.

"Looks like it's going to get cold again tomorrow."

"Guess that means I need to buy some stuff to prepare…that's going to cost me."

Our pace gradually slowed to a stroll as we walked and chatted. Then, we heard a voice.

"Thank you for going out with me today, Sakayanagi-san."

"Oh, no, no. The pleasure's mine."

Turning, I spotted a rather unusual pair: Ichinose and Sakayanagi. Ichinose, noticing our group, raised her hand and waved. Sakayanagi didn't look in my direction, but rather, gave our entire group a cursory glance as we went past. Even though she'd made what amounted to a declaration of war against me, she'd done nothing since the sports festival.

"It's unusual to see you in this group, Ayanokouji-kun," Ichinose said.

"Really?" She thought *I* was behaving unusually? The strange sight was the Class A and B leaders hanging out together like friends on a day off.

"Well, based on what I've seen, you're with Horikita-san a lot of the time. This is different," said Ichinose, taking a long look at our group's members. "That reminds me. I heard that you won against Class C in the exam. Congrats! We lost to Class A, unfortunately."

“Only by a slim margin. Two points. I think we were just about evenly matched,” said Sakayanagi. The battle had been close, and it seemed Class B was just barely lagging behind Class A by the end. “With this win under your belt, Class D might actually become Class C next semester, right?”

“Wow! Class B’s going to have to be really careful, or we might get overtaken ourselves!” said Ichinose.

“We do intend to overtake you,” Keisei interjected, overtly serious as always. “We’ll make it to Class A eventually.”

Sakayanagi closed her eyes and chuckled. Keisei seemed to find that insulting, but he had to remember that we were still Class D for now. No one in our group was especially close to Ichinose, and since we weren’t really the type to force smiles or engage in small talk, the conversation ground to a halt.

“Ah, sorry. Guess we’re bothering you guys. See you later,” said Ichinose graciously.

Sakayanagi neither spoke to me nor made eye contact, just followed Ichinose away.

“They’re rivals, right? Those two?” asked Haruka.

“There’s no doubt they’re enemies.” Keisei eyed them both suspiciously, pushing his glasses up.

“That’s just like Ichinose, though, right?” It was a well-known fact that Ichinose could make friends with anyone.

“It’s just, like, how do I put this?” muttered Airi. “It’s like Ichinose-san lives in a different world from us or something.”

“As a fellow woman, I kinda don’t like her.”

“What? Do you dislike Ichinose, Haruka?”

“I don’t *dislike* her, it’s just…she’s way too perfect at everything. You can’t be human without at least a couple flaws, right? I sorta almost hope that she’s actually rotten on the inside.”

“You have a point. She’s so flawless it’s almost creepy. Saying you hope she’s rotten inside is going a bit too far, though,” said Akito.

“That’s true. I’m just saying that being flawless and totally sweet is boring, even in a manga,” said Haruka. She thrust her hands inside her pockets as she watched Ichinose walk away.

“I…I think it’s good that she’s like that, though. If Ichinose-san really was a bad person like Haruka-chan said, no one would believe it,” said Airi. She sounded anxious, as if she really didn’t want that to be true.

“I guess so. Maybe there really are unbelievably kind, perfect people in the world. We may just not even know them when we see them,” said Haruka.

“We’re going to make it to Class A. When that happens, Ichinose will be our enemy. I think it’s best if we don’t get too close,” said Keisei.

He had a point. If Ichinose *was* as kind and benevolent as she seemed, it would make her a tougher opponent to oppose. Someone as awful as Ryuuen inspired no sympathy, but I wondered whether our class would have the heart to crush Ichinose if it came to it.

If our class was promoted, more conflict down the road was inevitable. We’d be attacked from below by Ryuuen and the newly demoted Class C, who’d be raring for revenge. It was unclear what would happen to Horikita and Ichinose’s currently cooperative relationship in the future, too. In an ideal world, we’d work together with Ichinose to attack Class A. Then, once Classes B and D were promoted to Classes A and B respectively, we’d end our alliance and turn on each other.

Of course, I doubted that things would be that simple.

“Looks like the road ahead is strewn with pitfalls, huh?”

ADVANCED NURTURING HIGH SCHOOL

First-Year Class D Teacher Evaluation

Class Point Total as of 12/1:

262

UP UNTIL SUMMER VACATION

Class D was uncoordinated and seemed unable to cooperate with one another. Some students were overconfident, while others gave up at the start. Their future seems full of challenges.

THE DESERTED ISLAND TEST

Unlike previous years, Class D managed to come out on top this time. However, their cooperation abilities haven't improved. They seem to have won through luck.

THE CRUISE SHIP TEST

Working alongside other classes led Class D to finally recognize their own lack of coordination. In addition, establishing new relationships led to various personal revelations.

THE SPORTS FESTIVAL

Class D managed to work together and cooperate as a team for the first time. They might've been able to triumph, but they still need to develop their fundamental abilities. We hope to see more effort from every student.

THE PAPER SHUFFLE

Class D conquered the exam, resorting to clever counterattacks when faced with unforeseen circumstances. However, many students remain unaware of all of the school's rules, so we'll continue to monitor their progress.

Chapter 4:
Insanity

ONE DAY, shortly before winter vacation, a storm hit Class D. It happened just after the end of homeroom. Our classroom door swung open, and Ryuuen and his fellow Class C students strode inside. The entire class immediately erupted into chaos.

Chabashira-sensei glanced at Ryuuen and the others, but left without a word. It would've been one thing if a brawl broke out right then and there, but there was no issue with students from another class coming to visit.

Ryuuen and his classmates had observed Class D from a distance so far. Since they hadn't gotten the answers they'd been looking for, they'd finally decided to take a direct approach. Or perhaps they were acting on a strategy I couldn't yet understand. In any case, they'd clearly decided to confront us.

Horikita, who was packing up her things to leave, stopped and stared at the Class C group consisting of Ryuuen, Ishizaki, and Yamada Albert. Komiya and Kondou were there, too.

With all these opponents gathered together in force, the mood was tense.

"Hey, what's goin' on? This is Class D." Sudou was the first to react. He was usually quick to pick a fight, but seemed more defensive this time. More importantly, he probably felt he needed to protect Horikita.

He stood and approached Ryuuen; Hirata panicked and hurried to stand between them, probably afraid that they were about to get violent.

"Do you have some business with our class, Ryuuen-kun?" Hirata asked.

In response, Ryuuen exaggeratedly raised his hands. "Is there any reason I can't visit my classmates? That *does* happen at this school, doesn't it? Visiting a pal. Why're you all shaking?"

The statement sounded like a provocation, but Hirata remained cool and composed. “That’s normally true, yes. But this school isn’t normal, is it? Besides, you’ve never visited Class D before.”

“We’ve been too estranged. I thought we should be a little more assertive about buddying up,” said Ryuuen. He placed his hand on a nearby girl’s desk, showing off his white teeth in a grin. “Man, you guys sure did great in the Paper Shuffle. Class C lost because of your brilliance. Well, the results still aren’t out, but word is you guys might be Class C next semester. That’s huge.”

“Heh. Guess the only thing big about you is your head, you incompetent monkey. Time for *you* to get a taste of being Class D,” said Sudou.

Hirata grabbed Sudou by the shoulder to reign him in, clearly panicked. “It’s because we’ve been working hard.”

“Working hard, huh?” said Ryuuen. “I mean, the concept of hard work seems completely foreign to Sudou, yet he’s still here. I thought he’d be the first to get kicked out.”

“So, you *do* remember my name,” said Sudou.

Ryuuen and Sudou stared each other down. The air between them was electric. Several classmates who’d been heading out stood frozen in place.

“Could you tell us why you’re really here?” asked Hirata. Perhaps he wanted to bring the situation under control as soon as possible, and was therefore trying to keep Ryuuen from dragging it out. Or perhaps he was just being as straightforward as always.

“I’m giving you a fair warning, Class D,” said Ryuuen.

“Warning? What do you mean?”

“I have no intention of explaining things to an idiot. Or are you just pretending not to understand?”

It might’ve seemed as if he was trying to provoke Hirata, but in fact, Ryuuen barely even looked at him. He was busy scanning the entire classroom. He might have aimed his statement at me, or Keisei, or even Akito.

Ultimately, his gaze landed on a rather unexpected person. The individual in question didn’t even realize Ryuuen was staring at him—or perhaps he just didn’t care. In fact, he was heading back to the

dorms.

Kouenji got up and nonchalantly left the classroom, apparently unaffected by Ryuuen's presence. Ryuuen gave a quiet chuckle and signaled his comrades to follow him. They left immediately, and as the door closed behind them, the tension in our classroom dissipated at once and was replaced by an uproar.

"Hey, hey, that Ryuuen dude looked like he was gonna do something crazy! This is unreal!" Ike exclaimed.

"They're plannin' to do something to Kouenji," said Yamauchi. "Right?"

Indeed. Kouenji Rokusuke, Class D's resident enfant terrible. Conspiracy theories flew every which way, starting with Ike and Yamauchi.

Unusually, Kushida stayed out of it. She'd stopped getting as actively involved with class issues, perhaps due to her defeat at Horikita's hand. Even now, though she was murmuring to some other girls about Ryuuen and his crew, she wasn't actively contributing to the conversation.

"This is really bad, isn't it?" asked Horikita, while I was deep in thought. Even she, who wanted to avoid entanglement with Class C as far as possible, couldn't leave this situation alone.

"Maybe," I said.

It did seem as though Ryuuen had some business with Kouenji, but that puzzled me. me think. Kouenji was weird, sure, but even to an outside observer, the possibility of him being a big mover and shaker in Class D had to be low. There had to be a reason why Ryuuen was trying to make contact with him in such a blatant way, while simultaneously scoping out a number of other people.

"Should we go check it out, Kiyotaka?" asked Akito.

"So many people are around, though. There's not much Class C can try."

"They may have something planned."

"I suppose… I guess even though lots of people are watching, that's no guarantee Ryuuen won't try something."

This was odd. Even from an outside perspective, the probability

that Kouenji was Class D's secret savior was low. In the unlikely event that Class C assaulted Kouenji, other members of Class D might get in trouble for jumping into the fray. Then again, if we held back when we could've helped, we'd regret it.

When I went into the hallway with Akito, Keisei trailed me. "I'll come, too. Safety in numbers," he reasoned.

Horikita lagged slightly behind us, and Sudou followed her. Hirata also came along, looking worried. This was shaping up to be a real storm. I asked Keisei and Akito to wait, then went to talk to Hirata.

"Wouldn't it be better if you stayed behind, Hirata? If you come, other students might follow. If people like Ike and Yamauchi join in, it'll add fuel to the fire," I said.

"That's true…but will Kouenji-kun be all right?"

"Horikita's coming. Keisei and Akito are too. In the worst-case scenario, if it looks like things are getting violent, I'll call you."

"Keisei? Huh. Okay. Just don't do anything rash, sound good?" Hirata looked puzzled at the way I referred to Yukimura, but went back inside the classroom.

"That was the right decision, Kiyotaka." Keisei nodded. "Besides, Hirata's better suited to calming the rest of the class down."

The next problem was figuring out where Kouenji and the others went. Even Ryuuen and his goons couldn't start trouble in the school building. If they were going to try something, it would probably be outside, but I had no idea where Kouenji might've gone.

"Where does Kouenji normally go after class?" I asked.

"No idea."

"I don't know, either." Akito and Keisei tilted their heads to the side, apparently clueless.

"Does anyone know anything about Kouenji?" Practically none of us ever spoke to him at length.

"He usually heads straight back to the dorms."

"How do you know?"

"I see him fairly often. Let's head to the entrance for now."

If his shoes were still there, we could confirm that he was still in

the school building. In that case, we probably still had enough time to deal with this. We hurried there, keeping pace with one another.

“Could be a serious fight,” said Sudou to Horikita, clenching his fists.

“Don’t be funny. Violence between Classes D and C is nothing to laugh about. More importantly, why are you following me?”

“Well, ’cuz I’m worried about you, Suzune, you know? There are rumors that Ryuuen will even hit girls.”

“I’m not so soft that I need your protection,” said Horikita.

“Don’t say that.”

Horikita was as bullish as ever, and Sudou’s chivalry was misguided. A girl could easily take down a boy if she had the requisite martial arts skill. However, Sudou was Sudou, and the idea that Horikita was strong enough to hold her own probably hadn’t occurred to him.

“Besides, though I may be worrying needlessly, what about your club?” asked Horikita.

“Not to worry. Still got a little time left until practice. Let’s hurry up and find Kouenji.” Sudou was going nowhere.

“For crying out loud. I don’t want a troublemaker tailing me around,” she muttered.

Still, if Horikita got hurt taking these Class C guys on by herself, Sudou would go nuclear. If the school caught him picking fights again, he was done for. Letting him come along might’ve been the best way for us to keep an eye on him.

4.1

LEAVING THE SCHOOL BUILDING, we took the tree-lined path back to the dormitories. Since class had just ended, barely anyone was around, but we saw a bunch of Class C guys on the path ahead. Ibuki was with them, though she hadn't accompanied Ryuuen when he visited our classroom. Some distance in front was Kouenji, walking alone.

It seemed Class C really planned to attack him. As Ryuuen drew closer, he ordered Ishizaki to block Kouenji's path.

"It's just like Suzune predicted. Let's stop 'em," said Sudou, looking to Horikita for orders.

"Let's wait and see what happens. We still don't know what Ryuuen-kun's after," reasoned Horikita.

As Ryuuen himself said, it was well within the rules to simply talk to someone from another class. We approached slowly, observing the situation.

"Hey, Kouenji. Lemme pick your brain, eh?" Ryuuen called.

"What're you doing? I don't recall behaving in any way that'd warrant you flagging me down." Because Ishizaki was in the way, I couldn't see Kouenji's face. But his tone of voice was arrogant as usual.

"You don't get to decide that."

"Hmph. You certainly don't, either," replied Kouenji. He looked at Ryuuen and his goons without the slightest hint of anxiety.

"You remember me, don't you?" asked Ryuuen. Both hands still in his pockets, he walked up to Kouenji.

"Of course. You're Class C's obnoxious dictator, aren't you?" said Kouenji.

"I missed you last time, but now you're coming with me, freak," spat Ryuuen.

"My apologies. I'm afraid I must've been busy, whenever you missed me," said Kouenji, smoothing his hair back. It didn't seem like much of an apology. "However, you just said something I'm afraid I cannot overlook. When you said 'freak,' were you referring to me?"

“Who else could I be referring to?”

“Well, even though I find your statement entirely baffling, I suppose I’ll just let it go. I’m quite a magnanimous fellow, you see. I have a date, so let’s wrap things up quickly, shall we?”

“Sorry, but you’re going to have to postpone your date.”

“So, you’ve no intention of backing down?”

“What’ll you do if we don’t leave?”

Kouenji crossed his arms and appeared deep in thought for a moment.

“Well, I suppose we’ll discuss your business over there,” he said eventually, pointing to a rest area up ahead.

“I don’t care where we go,” said Ryuuen.

“Then follow me.”

They trailed Kouenji to the rest area up the path, threatening to leave our sightline.

“Seems like we’d better go over there, too,” said Sudou.

Horikita stopped him at once. “Don’t say or do anything reckless. Understand?”

“Y-yeah.”

Sudou took the lead, with Horikita in hot pursuit. The rest of us followed slightly behind, and we headed over. “Ryuuen-kun,” Horikita called to Ryuuen. “What are you planning? If you try anything, we’re going to have trouble.”

“Heh. So, you took the bait, huh?”

Ryuuen looked over his shoulder as if he’d known someone would follow him from the very beginning. He scanned our entire group. Though Kouenji likely interested him, this was a trap designed to narrow down Class C’s list of suspects. That was why Ryuuen deliberately marched his fighters into Class D. His aim had been to smoke us all out, and he had.

“Ayanokouji, Miyake, and Yukimura, huh? Well, that’s acceptable.”

“I’m here too, Ryuuen,” said Sudou, smashing his fists together.

“What happened to Hirata?” Ryuuen added.

“Who knows? Haven’t got a clue. You aren’t interested in him anyway, right?”

“Oh, spare me. That guy’s sense of justice is so strong, it wouldn’t be strange if he showed up here,” said Ryuuen.

“This isn’t going to go the way you think,” said Horikita.

“Well, that’s fine. For now, anyway.”

Ryuuen lifted his chin in a signal. On his command, Ishizaki and the others surrounded Kouenji.

Akito, watching the situation unfold, couldn’t hide his disgust. “It’s like he thinks he’s a king. Bossing his classmates around just by moving his chin,” he spat.

“Sorry, Miyake, but I was born this way,” replied Ryuuen. Hands still in his pockets, he drew closer to Kouenji.

“Stop,” Horikita said.

“Stop? What should I stop? As you can plainly see, I’m not doing anything.”

No one had laid a single finger on Kouenji yet.

“I don’t particularly mind playing around, but it seems that my presence here isn’t a necessity. Would you agree?” asked Kouenji.

Ryuuen faced him once again, ignoring Horikita’s warning. “That reminds me. You’ve got the lead role today, Kouenji. You owe me a debt.”

“A debt? I haven’t the foggiest notion of what you mean.”

“The zodiac test. Thanks to you, I lost the chance to capitalize on more points,” said Ryuuen.

“Ah. If I impeded you, you have my apologies.”

So Kouenji said, but he sure didn’t look the least bit apologetic. In a brazen gesture, he took his hand mirror from his breast pocket. The Class C goons eyed him suspiciously, and he responded in a courteous manner.

“It’s quite windy today. I’m making sure my debonair hairdo isn’t mussed up.” Turning his face left and right, he checked his reflection. “Hmm. I’m looking tragically disheveled. Sorry, but would you mind

holding this?"

Kouenji presented Ryuuen with his hand mirror. Ryuuen took it, smiling.

"You may aim the mirror toward me," said Kouenji. Retrieving a small container of hair wax from his bag, he scooped a glob onto his finger and started styling his hair with both hands.

Class C, taken aback, couldn't do nothing to respond…until a shattering sound cut through the air. Ryuuen had thrown the mirror to the ground, cracking it. Still wearing that smile, he grabbed Kouenji's arm.

"I wonder how long you can keep up this freakshow?" he said.

Kouenji, still arranging his hair, sighed gently. "You really are quite the scoundrel. That mirror was rather expensive, you know."

"Sorry. My hand slipped," said Ryuuen.

"Tch. In that case, will you kindly release my arm so I may finish styling my hair? Of course, I'm the kind of man who'd look good even with disheveled hair," said Kouenji.

We were on pins and needles as the tension grew. Ryuuen slowly let go of Kouenji's arm. Doing this in public was risky behavior, but in keeping with his usual style of trying to push his enemies to their limits.

"Knock it off, Ryuuen-kun."

"Quiet, Suzune. I'm playing with Kouenji."

"Aren't you just attacking him? This seems one-sided. He doesn't want this." Carefully picking up fragments of the broken hand mirror, Horikita glared at Ryuuen.

"I'll do it. You might hurt your hands," said Sudou to Horikita.

"I don't mind. It'd be more of a problem if the glass cut you, because you have your club."

"Don't say stupid stuff like that. I can't let a girl get hurt." Sudou moved Horikita aside and began picking up the fragments.

"I'm not doctoring you if you get cut," said Horikita. Sudou ignored that and kept picking up the pieces.

"My, this is quite an interesting collection of people, isn't it?" someone said.

As if summoned to the rest area by some unseen cue, Sakayanagi and her coterie strolled up to us. I saw Kamuro Masumi among her followers, but knew nothing about the two other guys, though I remembered their faces.

“Sakayanagi, huh? What suspiciously perfect timing.”

Sakayanagi stopped and lightly tapped her cane on the concrete. This was turning into quite the crowd. Including Kouenji, six of us were gathered here from Class D, five from Class C, and now four from Class A, making a total of fifteen people.

“I’m here purely by coincidence,” said Sakayanagi.

“Don’t make me laugh,” Ryuuen said.

“To think I’d stumble on Class C’s major players having it out with some Class D students. Are you planning a Christmas party?”

“Back off. I don’t have any business with you,” snapped Ryuuen.

“Come now, there’s no need to say that. If you’re party-planning, the more the merrier. Wouldn’t you agree? May I join you?”

“If you plan on sticking around, don’t get in my way.”

“Of course. I wouldn’t dream of embarrassing the party organizer,” said Sakayanagi.

She took a seat on a nearby bench. The three other Class A students sat around her, as if shielding her with their bodies. There were no surveillance cameras in this rest area, after all, though we were surrounded by students walking back to the dorms. There was no telling how many people might walk by.

Kouenji Rokusuke, still wearing that bold, fearless smile, spoke once more. “I don’t mind that our audience has grown, but isn’t it about time that we end this? If we aren’t going to talk, I’ll be on my way.”

“Wait, Kouenji. Ryuuen-san said not to let you run away this time.”

Kouenji wore a thin smile. “My apologies that our conversation was delayed. I think we should get to the heart of the matter. I surmise that you’re fixated on defeating whomever gets in Class C’s way, or whomever forms an alliance with another class to do exactly that. Am I wrong?”

“I’ll crush every such insect in my way, yeah,” said Ryuuen.

“And now, such an obstreperous person has appeared within Class D. So, you’re searching for this hindrance,” said Kouenji. He seemed to understand the situation very well for someone who showed no interest in anything around him.

“Exactly.”

“In that case, I’m afraid I don’t fit the profile. I have absolutely no interest whatsoever in Class D’s future, nor in any of the other classes. I’ve contributed nothing noteworthy to any exam thus far, and I have no intention of doing so. Tell me, are you truly fixated on making such a person your enemy?”

“Well, how would you explain the zodiac exam, then? Talk’s gotten around,” said Ryuuen.

“Oh *ho.* You seem to be quite the knowledgeable fellow.”

During the zodiac exam, Kouenji had rather brilliantly discovered the identity of the Monkey Group’s VIP. Even understanding that Class D won after seeing the results, however, it should’ve been difficult for Ryuuen to pinpoint any specific student as the one who figured that out. He really *had* done his homework. Or perhaps he guessed that Kouenji was assigned to the Monkey Group?

“Oh, that. I was simply saving time. I didn’t really feel like participating in those bothersome meetings, so I decided to end it and enjoy my freedom again. Nothing more,” said Kouenji. He got his phone and used the camera to appraise his face. It was sufficient as a makeshift hand mirror, apparently.

“We can’t rule out the possibility that you helped with other tests,” said Ryuuen. “That means there’s no guarantee that you aren’t controlling Class D.”

“I suppose that’s possible. But if it’s the conclusion you’ve settled on, it must mean you’re a moron with a paltry intellect,” said Kouenji.

Ishizaki looked ready to charge, but Ryuuen smiled and stopped him. I had to admit that I admired Kouenji’s comeback. If Ryuuen *was* harassing the wrong person, he’d come off looking pretty stupid.

“Heh. You’re certainly right. If you *are* telling the truth, then you’re completely and utterly harmless.”

“Yes. You’re quite perceptive, Dragon Boy.”

Sakayanagi started laughing at the nickname “Dragon Boy.”

Ryuuen changed the topic entirely. “What if I tell these guys to pummel you unconscious as payback for the zodiac exam? What’ll you do if I come at you with senseless violence?”

Horikita tried to reply to that disturbing question, but Kouenji cut her off with a laugh. “Now *that’s* just nonsensical. You wouldn’t do that here, with this large of an audience. It wouldn’t benefit you at all.”

“I’m quite capable of going on a rampage even in this rather inconvenient place, benefits aside,” said Ryuuen.

“I see. I suppose that if you *did* choose that option, I’d defend by pride and knock down everyone who came at me,” said Kouenji.

“You could do that by yourself?”

“I find it harder to imagine why I *couldn’t*.”

Sakayanagi, still listening, merely grinned.

“Looks like my reasoning was off,” said Ryuuen. “Kouenji doesn’t seem to be X. He *is* completely nuts, though in a different way from me. Seems that’s all there is to it.”

“So glad to have cleared up this misunderstanding,” replied Kouenji.

“But let me ask you one thing, Kouenji. Class D’s points are steadily increasing. Someone has to be responsible for that. If it’s not you, who is it? One of the people who followed us here like a flock of slack-jawed sheep?” asked Ryuuen.

For the first time, Kouenji glanced at us. Then he sneered and shrugged, having immediately lost interest. “I’m happy to tell you, but —”

“May I have a moment?” Sakayanagi seemed as if she was trying to keep Kouenji from speaking. “This is a fascinating conversation. Someone in Class D is getting in Class C’s way, are they? I heard rumors that Dragon Boy-san was searching for such a person, but is that really true?”

“I told you to shut up already, Sakayanagi. And if you call me that again, I’ll kill you. Got it?”

“My, my, you don’t like it? I think it’s a *wonderful* nickname. Sorry. Anyway, there’s something here that I don’t quite understand.”

Ryuuen laughed in response, but Sakayanagi paid him no mind.

“Someone in Class D saw through your plans and defeated you,” she continued. “Is that all there is to it? This school is fundamentally designed to pit classes against each other. You and I have clashed numerous times in this manner. I don’t know who this Class D student is, but they’re employing excellent strategy by remaining anonymous while waging war on you. Are you really going to expend all this energy on interrogating an unrelated student? Honestly, I can’t see your actions as anything but rather pathetic.”

“I’ll admit that X screwed up my plans,” replied Ryuuen, “but that’s not the problem here. I’m doing this to draw out the person acting behind the scenes. I’m going to drag him kicking and screaming to the forefront.”

“I see. So, you intend to resort to extortion and blackmail if you must?”

“Yep. I’m prepared to use violence, too, if necessary. I rather enjoy my way of doing things.”

“If you do that, not only will you appear pathetic, but you’ll also reveal your own incompetence. I heard quite a bit already from Masumi-san and Hashimoto-kun about the strategy you used on the island, and how your tricks failed. If you regard the situation objectively, it’s clear that Kouenji wasn’t involved, isn’t it? Besides, I heard that the mastermind was Horikita Suzune-san, the girl standing right over there. I wonder—does this person you’re searching for even exist in the first place?” Sakayanagi asked, excoriating Ryuuen with her sharp gaze and words.

“Are you sure you’re not just trying to cover up your own failure, Ryuuen-kun?” muttered one Class A student.

“That’s going too far, Kitou. Ryuuen isn’t *that* much of an idiot,” replied another. I think it was Hashimoto, or whatever his name was.

Ryuuen showed no sign of agitation at Class A’s provocations. He understood that type of strategy better than anyone, after all. Rather than argue about what Sakayanagi said, he switched tracks.

“*You’re* the idiot, Sakayanagi. I used Katsuragi. I made him sign a contract with me.”

“A contract? Ah. ‘In exchange for assistance provided to Class A by Class C, private points will be paid as compensation,’ or something to that effect, yes? Specifically, there was a clause that said ‘twenty

thousand private points will be paid per person per month until graduation,' right?" Sakayanagi rattled off smoothly.

"Huh? What?! Are you really okay with that?" cried Sudou.

"It's not against the rules," said Sakayanagi. "It's a contract both classes mutually agreed upon. We'd receive the class points that Class C should've received, and compensate them with private points in exchange."

I knew that classes A and C formed an alliance during the island exam, but the exact nature of the deal had been unclear to me. Apparently, after using up all their points and leaving their 270 remaining points (minus the thirty deducted due to Sakayanagi's absence) to Class A, Class C had requested twenty thousand private points in exchange.

At first glance, it might seem like Class C came out on the better end of the deal. However, what was most important was whether you could lead in *class* points at the end of the exam. Class points determined the class rankings, after all. You might even say the private points were only awarded as a bonus. If Katsuragi hadn't taken the deal, the island test could've gone much worse for Class A. They would have had barely any class points remaining now, and the gap between them and Class B would be much narrower.

However, why bring this up now, after keeping it quiet all this time? It looked like Sakayanagi was trying to show up Ryuuen. He'd accused her of being stupid, and she'd made a fool of him in response by showing she'd known about the contract all along. Maybe?

"Well, I'm not the one who's gonna be in trouble if those details leak. You will," said Ryuuen. "Other classes will find out we've been getting twenty thousand monthly points from you, won't they?"

"If you wanted to tell everyone, you would've done so already. Besides, it was Katsuragi-kun who suggested the contract in the first place," Sakayanagi replied definitively.

She hadn't been present on the island, and could avoid taking responsibility for the decision. It was even possible that she instructed her followers in Class A to let Katsuragi go ahead, but we couldn't know. What mattered was that Katsuragi was keeping a low profile right now, while Sakayanagi appeared to be in control of the class.

"Ugh. So, Class C's basically got a guaranteed monthly

allowance?" grumbled Sudou.

"Don't let them fool you, Sudou-kun. Class C could've obtained those class points themselves, but they wasted them. They gained nothing," said Horikita.

"Is that really true, Suzune?" asked Ryuuen. "It's no different than getting two hundred class points the real way, back on the island. Besides, our private point income is going to continue indefinitely. We'll keep earning those points until Class A loses their standing."

"Wrong. It seems similar, but it's not. All you're getting is private points. They have nothing to do with class points."

In that regard, Horikita was correct. However, eight hundred thousand private points flowing from Class A to Class C every month was significant. Even if Class C continued to lose class points from here on, they were guaranteed an allowance. Though Sakayanagi's faction was coming for them, Katsuragi's faction had given Class C a free ride.

"Are we finished here? I have no intention of denying you your fun, but I'd like for you to get out of my way. I've wasted enough time listening to your meaningless drivel," said Kouenji.

"Wait, Kouenji. You haven't answered yet."

Kouenji looked at the sky, as if trying to remember. "Something about a clever person in Class D, was it? To be honest, I hadn't even considered it. At any rate, it's probably better if I don't tell you, right? You're doing whatever it takes to hunt this person down, even if it means putting yourself at risk. I don't wish to rob you of your fun. As for me, I don't care for anyone in this school. I'm simply enjoying the halcyon days of my youth, romancing beautiful women and basking in my own beauty."

"So, you're saying you won't help your own class?"

"I haven't, and I won't. I said that all along. From my perspective, Class A and Class D are the same. All of you people are so dreadfully boring."

"Ryuuen-san, this jerk's looked down on us for the last time! Let's teach him a lesson!"

Ishizaki raised his fists, but the person who spoke up to stop him wasn't Ryuuen. It was Sakayanagi, who had simply sat on the sidelines and smiled at us so far. Kouenji had said something she couldn't

overlook.

“There’s something you said that interests me,” she began. “Dragon Boy-san aside—”

“Whoa!”

Ryuuen rushed Sakayanagi and launched a kick. Hashimoto hurried between them in a panic, blocking Ryuuen’s foot with his left arm. He went flying, landing hard on the concrete, but if he hadn’t intervened, Ryuuen probably would’ve kicked Sakayanagi in the face. A white-gloved Class A boy, Kitou, immediately took a fighting stance.

“Oh, did I hurt your feelings?” asked Sakayanagi.

“I told you I’d kill you if you called me that again.”

“Stop this at once. What you just did is horrible,” Horikita started, but Sakayanagi stopped her.

“Is there a problem with what just happened, Hashimoto-kun?”

“No. I fell over.” Hashimoto slowly got back up, dusting himself off.

“There you have it, Horikita-san.”

“Tch. Both you and Ryuuen-kun are lunatics,” Horikita said.

Even in the face of a deliberate act of violence, the Class A students led by Sakayanagi showed no signs of discontent. If anything, they looked entirely ready to trade blows.

“I’m sorry, Ryuuen-kun. I’ve teased you too much,” said Sakayanagi. She focused back on Kouenji. “To return to my original question—what do you mean when you say that everyone here, myself included, is boring?”

“For crying out loud…” muttered Horikita. Her exasperation was understandable.

“Did I really hurt your feelings that much, little girl?” Kouenji pointed at Sakayanagi, approaching the bench where she sat.

“Tsk. Little girl, hmm? That’s a *wonderful* nickname,” Sakayanagi replied. Ryuuen snorted in amusement, as if that was payback for Kouenji calling him Dragon Boy. “Kouenji-san, was it? Your English could use some work. I’m not a little girl.”

“That’s not for you to decide. Calling you a little girl is

appropriate, considering your age and physique," replied Kouenji.

"That is precisely where you're mistaken. The appropriate usage of the words 'little girl' would be to describe girls of elementary school age. You cannot alter the rules of the world at will," said Sakayanagi.

"Being a slave to common practice isn't my style," said Kouenji. He brushed his fingers through his hair.

"Knock it off, Kouenji," said Kitou, stepping forward. He motioned as if to remove his white gloves, which I initially thought he wore to protect his hands from the cold. Apparently, that wasn't it.

"The heck is *with* that guy? Will a demon appear if he takes those gloves off or something?" Sudou muttered.

"What?" I asked, surprised.

"You don't know? It's from this old manga that used to be real popular. There's this dude, and when he takes off his white glove, a demon shows up to fight devils," said Sudou. I'd never heard of it in my life, but then again, I'd never read any manga.

"I have no business with Class A. Leave now," commanded Kouenji.

"Allow me to correct this boy's behavior," said Kitou to Sakayanagi.

"Ha ha! Well, I don't mind you fighting over me. Unfortunately, my tastes in both men and women run toward older people," said Kouenji. He was toying with both Sakayanagi and Ryuuen, the representatives of their respective classes. Maybe lunacy was a kind of power after all, much like both violence and lies.

"We've concluded our business. Now get lost," snapped Ryuuen. Dealing with something like Kouenji had to be exhausting, even for him.

"Very well, then. See you," said Kouenji. He turned on his heel and walked away.

The storm we'd feared would break might just have been Kouenji, not Ryuuen.

With that source of controversy gone, everyone grew quiet. Sudou had collected most of the broken mirror's shards, and it seemed that the tension had dissipated for now.

“Well, show’s over,” said Sakayanagi. “Shall we head back?”

“Better be on your guard for the third semester, Sakayanagi,” warned Ryuuen.

“Of course. If you’re so certain you’ve defeated Class D, I’ll be your opponent anytime,” Sakayanagi shot back as she left with her entourage in tow.

“Should we head back too, Horikita?” I asked.

“Yeah. I can’t stand being here a moment longer. Although…I must say, Ryuuen-kun seemed less interested in Kouenji-kun than I anticipated,” mused Horikita.

Ryuuen’s actions clearly still puzzled her, and it seemed Class C shared some of the same doubts.

“Should we really let him go that easily?” asked one of Ryuuen’s flunkies.

“If he were the one, I wouldn’t have let him leave,” answered Ryuuen.

“He seems super suspicious to me, though. He could’ve been lying.”

“His way of thinking doesn’t match mine. Whoever X is, he and I think the same way. Besides, does he even look like the type to join forces with Horikita?”

“It’s hard to imagine, true. But then why’d you target Kouenji?”

Ryuuen stopped watching Kouenji’s retreating back and turned a creepy grin on us. “Yo. What do *you* guys think about Kouenji?”

“You’ve been muttering a bunch of crap for a while now,” grumbled Sudou, clenching his fists. “I don’t get what you’re sayin’ at all.”

“Idiots should stay out of this,” said Ryuuen.

“What—?!”

Horikita stopped Sudou in his tracks with a look and a wave of her hand. “Your actions are bizarre and incomprehensible, Ryuuen-kun,” she said.

Ryuuen seemed to take that as a compliment. “In that case, I must be doing something right. I narrowed down my suspect list quite a bit

today, Suzune. Down to that weird creep lurking behind you."

"I'm not listening to anything you have to say. This is a waste of time. In future, stop approaching my classmates," said Horikita.

"I'm free to approach or not approach whomever I want. It's not against the rules." Ironic, considering how often he broke the rules. "Anyway, the show will be over soon. Can't wait for the grand finale."

Ryuuen glanced briefly at Sakayanagi's retreating form in the distance, then left.

"Finally. Let's go. We should tell Hirata-kun about this," said Horikita.

"What's Ryuuen's deal? You think he's up to something?" Sudou groused.

"Who knows? I doubt anyone truly understands how his mind works."

It sounds like Ryuuen's preparations are nearly complete, I decided as I watched him and his goons walk off. It wasn't a pleasant thought.

ADVANCED NURTURING HIGH SCHOOL

First-Year Class C Teacher Evaluation

Class Point Total as of 12/1:

542

UP UNTIL SUMMER VACATION

It seems to me that Ryuuen Kakeru, the unofficial Class C leader, has laid down some ironclad rules for his classmates to follow. It is my hope that he'll lead them to many victories.

THE DESERTED ISLAND TEST

Ryuuen Kakeru executed his own strategies. I must praise him for employing such unusual tactics without placing too much of a burden on the other Class C students.

THE CRUISE SHIP TEST

After acquiring no points at all during the island test, Class C turned things around and achieved the best possible results on this exam.

THE SPORTS FESTIVAL

Class C showed a burning desire to win, deploying various ideas and schemes toward that goal.

THE PAPER SHUFFLE

The difference between their academic abilities should've been marginal, but unfortunately, Class C lost to Class D. We must proceed with care as we enter the third semester.

Chapter 5:
Time to Settle Things

"THIS BRINGS US to the end of homeroom," said Sakagami-sensei, Class C's teacher. "I'd like to remind everyone to please be on your best behavior, even during winter vacation, and to make good use of your time. That's all."

I took out my phone as I listened to his gracious, meaningless words. Today was the day of the closing ceremony—the final day of the second semester. Our classes finished early, leaving us free by afternoon. There were no club activities today, either. The school encouraged students to head back early, so hardly anyone would be left in the building.

In other words, it was finally time to strike.

"I eliminated everyone I can, but that still leaves about ten possible candidates," I muttered to myself. Some were people I'd never even spoken to, but it couldn't be helped. I would've preferred to do this without using Karuizawa, but X had eluded me so far.

"Well, I guess this just means I get to have some more fun."

To be honest, there was a particular person I'd had my eye on all along, but I couldn't jump to conclusions yet. If anything, it would be all the more fun to be able to confront X with a clear head and no doubts.

I'd taken certain steps after the Paper Shuffle. I mobilized every Class C student and assigned them targets to spy on. Of course, it wasn't like tailing people was likely to get me much closer to discovering X's identity. I excluded the weaklings, narrowing my list of suspects to delinquents like Sudou and Miyake, and conservative people like Hirata.

The Class D punks had noticed they were being tailed—except for Sudou, who was so dumb and oblivious I'd had to have my people provoke him directly. But being noticed was fine by me. I wanted them constantly aware that I was watching. I wanted X to spend their days trembling with fear, terrified of having their identity discovered.

Yet they'd continued to use Suzune as a cover, stubbornly keeping

themselves hidden. Which meant I had to tighten the noose.

One more thing. Though I'd all but told X I'd target Karuizawa, I had yet to make a move. I was sure they'd been on edge these past two weeks or so, probably wondering how and when I'd contact Karuizawa, how I'd extract information from her. Chances were, they were asking her daily whether anything out of the ordinary had happened. The uncertainty would take it out of them. It would confuse them. They'd be exhausted, paranoid, and jumping at shadows, constantly imagining me breathing down their neck.

Which made today the best day for me to strike. Now, I was ready to corner them.

Even though it'd only been a few minutes since dismissal, more than half the class had left. The clock on the wall seemed as if it was ticking slower than normal.

"Heh heh…"

My heart raced. It'd been years since I felt this kind of exhilaration.

Ibuki had asked why I risked so much just to identify X. She called it meaningless. She was right that I didn't care about anything past discovering X's identity, at least. Ibuki thought I'd feel disappointed once I found out who X was. That might be true of normal people, but fighting Class D had led me to understand that X thought and moved like me. I'd never met another person like myself before. That fascination drove me onward.

I wondered how I would feel when I came face-to-face with X, and what my next goal would be. X had entertained me for so long. The thought of meeting them made my pulse quicken, almost like first love.

I would do anything, use any means, to find them. The text I'd sent to X this morning was already marked as read. They knew what was going to happen today. What would they do, then? What kind of plan would they devise?

"Ryuuen-kun," said Shiina Hiyori, who sat right beside me.

"What?" I asked.

"Everyone seems really restless today, don't they?" she asked, surveying the room. The remaining students all drew nearer to me. "What are you planning?"

“I’m going to confront my entertaining quarry of these past several months. You wanna come?” I asked.

“No, I must decline. I don’t quite see how that would be fun.” Shiina paused, then said, “Do you really need to hunt them down?”

“Huh?”

“Nothing. I suppose that’s for you to decide, Ryuuen-kun, as our class’s leader.” She stood. “I’ll be in the library. If there’s any trouble, please contact me.”

“It’s not like you’ll be of any use, though, is it?” I asked.

“I suppose you’re right. Well, have a nice winter vacation.”

She said that calmly, without a trace of fear, then left. Hiyori was clever, but she hated conflict, which made her useless as a pawn. People who obediently followed me around were much easier to use.

I finished my final preparations, then gathered my people.

“It’s time, isn’t it, Ryuuen-san?” said Ishizaki, looking restless.

“Let’s make the most of today,” I told him.

I handed Ishizaki a bag with certain indispensable items in it. Ibuki and Albert stood up, too. I didn’t need large numbers for this. I needed people who were tight-lipped, because we were about to do something that would shock this proper, well-behaved school to its core.

5.1

THIRTY MINUTES AFTER homeroom ended, winter vacation had begun. The campus was practically deserted. As with summer vacation, the students stampeded back to their dorms, leaving barely anyone to witness our bold movements.

"So, where are we going? Cut the crap and tell us," said Ibuki.

I'd said nothing of my current strategy to anyone, to eliminate the possibility of spies like Manabe and her friends. Ibuki and the rest only knew that I'd ordered Ishizaki and the other guys to keep an eye on Miyake and a few more people. Therefore, they didn't know the real reason I'd pressed Kouenji.

I had no doubt that X would do whatever necessary to keep their identity hidden. So, I'd hidden my plans as much as possible to improve my chances of cornering them.

"Concerned, Ibuki?"

"You make me nervous, dragging me into all your stupid schemes."

Ishizaki might have been curious about my true intentions as well, because he drew in closer, too.

"You remember Karuizawa, right?" I said. "She's the reason Manabe and her friends were strong-armed into spying on us for Class D."

"That loud girl from Class D, right?" Ibuki had infiltrated Class D on the deserted island, so she knew its students quite well.

"I sent Karuizawa a message today, asking her to come to the rooftop. Karuizawa knows I was the one who sent it, too. I got her email address from another girl in her class." I avoided saying the traitor's name. It wasn't necessary for me to reveal Kushida Kikyou's part in this yet.

"Huh? The rooftop? No way Karuizawa will come if *you* ask her."

"She'll definitely show. I told her that, if she doesn't, I'll expose her past."

If that pathetic bullying story went public, it would cause an uproar. Her social life would be dead in the water. She had no choice but to bite the bullet and turn up.

"Even if Karuizawa *does* show, do you think she'd tell you X's identity?"

"I suppose she wouldn't let that slip, normally…"

"Normally? No." X had almost certainly promised to protect Karuizawa from all her enemies. "But I sent X a message, too. I told them I was meeting Karuizawa today, and that I was going to learn their identity from her. That I'd use any means necessary to get what I wanted. That way, I'm not just threatening Karuizawa, but also threatening X at the same time."

"But…you sent a threatening message to Karuizawa, right? What if she tattles to the school? If X puts the idea in her head, she might." Ibuki glared at me, as if demanding to know why I hadn't thought that far ahead.

"She won't do that. If she does, I'll expose her right away. No matter what she tries, Karuizawa can't turn the tables on us."

The only countermeasure at their disposal would be if X showed up to confront me directly instead of Karuizawa.

"The worst-case scenario," I said, "will be if X shows up instead of Karuizawa. Regardless, it's going to be fun to see what Karuizawa does."

"I can't imagine it's worth the risk."

"That's not true at all. Crushing Karuizawa means taking one of X's most valuable pawns off the board. It seems they've been using her in various ingenious ways."

"How do you know that? I mean, I understand that X threatened Manabe and her friends to protect Karuizawa, but…"

Even I had only recently realized that Karuizawa was one of X's pawn. I had arrived at that conclusion precisely because of several incomprehensible things that happened during the Paper Shuffle.

"Heh. Well, eyes forward, Ibuki. X aside, you'll definitely get to see Karuizawa terrified by the threat of me exposing how she was bullied in the past," I said.

"If Karuizawa *does* show…what are you going to do if you can't

extract X's identity from her?" asked Ishizaki. Both he and Ibuki seemed concerned.

"According to Manabe and her friends, Karuizawa was bullied quite viciously in the past. People who've been through such traumatic experiences tend to lose control of themselves when placed in a similar scenario. Why don't we go ahead and reproduce those memories for her? Let's put on a show. We'll reenact her past until she tells us X's identity."

"No way. This is insane!" said Ibuki.

"This is extreme, Ryuuen-san. A bunch of us ganging up on and bullying a girl? I mean, there are cameras on the rooftop!"

"I'm fully aware of that. I have a plan."

I began ascending the stairs to the roof. Halfway up, I stopped and looked back at Ibuki and Ishizaki, who were lagging a couple steps behind.

"If you don't like it, run," I told them.

"I-I won't run. I'll follow you, Ryuuen-san."

"What about you, Ibuki?"

"It all depends on your plan. If I think it's dangerous, I'll leave." She'd been curious about X's identity for some time now, too.

I had Ibuki, Albert, and Ishizaki wait near the rooftop door, taking the bag from Ishizaki. I removed the necessary tools, then handed the bag back.

"This is…"

"Wait."

I opened the door. It was rare for a school rooftop to be accessible year-round. The reason this one did was because it had both proper fencing and a surveillance camera. Any dangerous activities would be recorded. Students knew this, which was why they behaved themselves up here.

However, the roof was also a secluded spot. With its cafes and mall, the campus had many much more popular hangouts. I was probably the only one eccentric enough to often come all the way up here.

There was also a limit to the number of cameras the school could

install. There was only one surveillance camera on this particular roof, positioned above the door, which was the only real place a camera could be installed here. The one camera was more than enough to capture nearly the entire rooftop in its field of view, leaving almost no blind spots. The flipside of this, of course, was that if that one camera stopped functioning, the rooftop would be unmonitored.

It was the same kind of camera as the ones in the school building: vandalism-proof, with a strong polycarbonate lens and tough steel body that would be tough to break. But violence wasn't the only way to disable a camera.

I stood directly underneath it and looked into the lens. I took the can of black spray paint I'd brought with me, pointed it at the lens, and sprayed.

"There. Safe from prying eyes," I said.

I'd done my research. Of the hundreds of cameras installed throughout the school, only a limited number displayed footage in real time, and this wasn't one of them. The school authorities wouldn't notice what was happening up here in time to stop it. I'd painted a different surveillance camera before, to test my theory, and my only punishment when I reported what I'd done to Sakagami was paying to have it cleaned.

The school was bound to be on low alert today, when most of the students had left.

"Albert, remain on standby down the stairs. When Karuizawa comes, let her pass. If anyone unexpected pays us a visit, like one of the teachers, call me right away."

Albert nodded and went back downstairs.

"You painted over the camera?" asked Ibuki. "Isn't that a punishable offense?"

"Just a simple prank. Nothing to get worked up over."

"We'd better hope Karuizawa shows up."

"She'll come. This is a matter of life and death for her."

All that remained was to wait.

5.2

IT WAS ALMOST TWO in the afternoon, just shy of the time I'd set for Karuizawa, when the rooftop door opened to admit a lone student. The leading lady of today's show appeared, stiffening in the cold air.

"Heh. I knew you'd come, Karuizawa."

I turned off my phone and slipped it into my pocket. Ibuki and Ishizaki faced Karuizawa, both looking a little nervous.

"The message you sent," said Karuizawa. "What's it supposed to mean?"

"There's really no need to ask me that. You're here precisely because you understand what it meant."

My message had read, *Manabe and her friends told me everything about your past. Come to the rooftop after class, alone. If you talk to anyone, word of your past will spread through the entire school.*

Just mentioning Manabe and her friends was enough to guarantee Karuizawa would understand what the message meant. She had no choice *but* to understand it.

"I'm guessing you told no one, as I instructed? Well, it's not like you had a choice. You can hardly let just *anyone* know about your past, after all." Karuizawa might've panicked and alerted X, considering that X alone probably knew her secret, but I didn't really care. As I told Ibuki and the others, I'd sent X a message myself.

Today, I'd pass judgment on Karuizawa. And then, I'd hound her for X's identity. Whether or not she'd asked for help, it didn't matter. The end result would be the same.

"You came alone after all, huh?" I asked.

"You told me to, didn't you?"

"Heh. Suppose so."

It wasn't like X, who'd done so much to hide their identity in the first place, was going to carelessly show up here. And Karuizawa couldn't ask for help from anyone other than X, because if she did, then her past would be exposed. The same applied to X, who wanted to keep

their identity hidden. In other words, both of their options were severely limited.

"Look. I really don't, like, have a single clue what you're talking about, but it's cold out. I wanna finish this quick." Karuizawa rubbed her arms, as if she had a chance of pretending she didn't know what was going on. She was a poor actress.

"In that case, why come here? You should've just ignored me."

"Well, that's…because I didn't want any lies spreading around."

She was trying her hardest to appear calm, but I easily called her bluff. "Lies, huh? Everyone here knows the truth… that you were bullied before you started high school."

"Ah…" When confronted with that, her behavior changed.

"It was a stroke of luck that Manabe and her friends found out. If you want to blame anyone, blame yourself for not handling them better."

"What do you want? What do you gain by threatening me?"

"What would you do if I told you I'm just killing time?" Though I still had plenty of leverage, Karuizawa was already out of options.

"If you do anything to me…I-I'll tell the school," she stammered.

"You came here alone because you know you can't do that."

"Aren't you getting carried away, Ryuuen? She might still have something up her sleeve," Ibuki said. She still seemed to suspect something was up, since Karuizawa had come to the rooftop alone.

"Karuizawa's powerless to do anything but rely on X. No need to be so cautious. Even if she records this conversation, it's not like she can do anything with it. Having her past exposed is her greatest fear. As long as we hold that card, she's at our mercy."

"But—"

"Enough. Shut up."

I already knew what Ibuki wanted to say. She was going to say that Manabe and her friends had been threatened with evidence of them bullying Karuizawa. They'd been forced to lay off her, made to promise they wouldn't speak a word of it to anyone, and then strongarmed into digging their own graves by giving away information about Class C.

Ibuki was anxious that evidence of what we were doing up here might be used to blackmail us the same way, but that wasn't going to happen. I would make sure of it.

Karuizawa's past was our weapon. As long as I made good use of that weapon, we had nothing to fear. Anyone trying to drive us into a corner would be doing the same to Karuizawa. And the danger there went both ways, of course. It was a double-edged sword.

I had to use the information at my disposal to cause enough disruption to be effective, but if I went ahead and entirely exposed Karuizawa's past to the school, I'd have nothing left to threaten her with. I'd crush Karuizawa, but X would get away. I had to find the person hiding behind Karuizawa. I had to learn X's true identity here and now, and to do that, I needed to gauge the strength of the connection between Karuizawa and X.

"Let's stop going in circles. You want me to let you off, right? Tell me the identity of the person hiding behind you. If you do, I'll keep quiet about your past," I told her.

"I don't, like, get what you mean." Karuizawa looked upset. She'd known that I was looking for the Class D mastermind, but until now, probably hadn't realized that we'd figured out her connection to them.

"X saved you from Manabe and her friends, right?"

"H-huh? You're wrong."

"It's pointless to hide. I've got evidence."

"Evidence?"

It seemed X had kept more details from Karuizawa than I'd thought. I would slowly and methodically exert more pressure on her until her back was up against the wall.

"How do you think X protected you from them?"

"I have no idea. Besides, they weren't bullying me. Even if you say this stuff about X, or whatever—"

"Okay, okay. I get it. If you're not going to fess up, I'll just tell you." Looked like she wasn't going to spill the beans unless she had the facts laid out for her. "X threatened to expose Manabe and her friends for bullying you if they didn't do as they said. That's how they got them to keep their mouths shut."

Karuizawa didn't answer. All she did was glare at me.

"Heh heh. I see… So, you did know how X kept Manabe and her friends quiet, then."

"I-I didn't say anything."

"No, you didn't. But your eyes told me the truth quite well on their own."

I continued speaking.

"If that was all X did, I wouldn't care. But that wasn't enough for them. You see, X forced Manabe and her friends to betray me during the sports festival, too. They made them be their spies and leak information to them by threatening to expose the fact that they'd been bullying you."

"What are you talking about? Seriously, I have no clue—"

"Your eyes are shifty, aren't they? Seems like this is the first time you heard about the sports festival."

There's no way, I thought. Perhaps Karuizawa actually didn't know who X was? If X always contacted her with an anonymous email address, then…

No. I didn't think Karuizawa would follow orders from someone she couldn't see and didn't know. If she really had no idea who they were, why not just admit she'd worked with them to an extent but knew nothing more? If she was denying that she knew *anything,* there had to be a reason for it.

"All I want is X's name. The name of the person who's been attacking me. I honestly couldn't care less about your past. Wouldn't it be wisest to comply?"

"No matter how many times you ask, my answer's the same. I don't know anything. Seriously, it's cold out here…" She was wearing extremely thin clothing. Perhaps she hadn't intended on being out here very long.

"Yeah, it sure *is* cold, isn't it? Don't you want to finish our little chat quickly and head back inside?"

"I have nothing to say."

"I see. If you insist on covering for X, then I have no choice. You're okay with me exposing your entire past?"

"I…"

Karuizawa was truly up a creek without a paddle. No matter what I did to attack her, she'd have no choice to keep her mouth shut. Whatever she chose, she'd be making an enemy. She could think about it all she wanted, but all that would do was waste time.

"There's no point fighting me," I said. "You can't brainstorm your way out of this situation. You know your options are limited. If you want to save yourself, you know the correct choice is to tell me their name."

"I-If there really *is* someone hiding in the shadows like that, you have no way of knowing whether the name I give you is actually the person you're looking for, right?" asked Karuizawa.

Ishizaki, perhaps because he was also hung up on that point, cut into our conversation without permission. "Ryuuen-san, she's right. We have no way to know if she's telling us the truth."

The idiot was just giving Karuizawa an escape route. I shot Ishizaki a look to tell him to be quiet. Realizing his mistake, he shut his mouth.

"If I find out you lied to me, I'll expose you later," I told Karuizawa.

"That—"

"The only way you can save yourself is to tell me everything you know." I laughed at her, but Karuizawa just looked at me sideways and countered my words.

"I'm not that stupid," she shot back. "It doesn't matter if I tell you the truth now, or lie. Either way, you'll just try to use this against me again down the line. Sorry, I'm not going to be a pawn you can use whenever you want."

"Heh. Yes, I suppose you're right. There's no guarantee I won't keep using this against you, like X used Manabe and her friends. Even so, what choice do you have?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny that there's someone hiding behind me. I'm not going to just blurt out a name to you, either. In other words, I have no answer for you."

Apparently, Karuizawa had determined that silence was the only correct answer. It wasn't a bad option, but I could hardly say it was the

best one.

"And if I expose you as a result?" I said.

"You think that someone's controlling Class D from the shadows, but you wouldn't have contacted me unless you'd failed to discover their identity so far. In which case, I'm the only lead you have, and you can't afford to throw me away."

"I see. So, if I expose your past before I get anything out of you, I'm screwed, eh? You won't tell me anything, and my hunt for X's identity will be delayed even further," I reasoned.

Karuizawa averted her eyes, as if to say, "Yes, that's exactly what I meant."

"Honestly, I don't really care if I don't learn X's identity from your lips. I'm happy to take my time figuring out who they are. You think that I won't have plenty of opportunities to catch X in the future?" I asked.

"That's assuming X comes at you again. If they notice that you're trying to figure out their identity, won't they be extra careful from now on?" she replied.

She was smarter than I thought. A clever, sharp-tongued woman. If X's mind really worked the same way mine did, they'd probably chosen her because they felt her social clout within Class D made her a valuable tool. X had no qualms about using people, which meant they probably had no qualms about abandoning her, either.

There was no doubt X was moving to advance Class D's prospects. What I couldn't rule out, however, was the possibility that if forced to choose, X would prioritize keeping their identity hidden over advancing Class D. If I went ahead and exposed Karuizawa, I might never find out who they were. That would really spoil my fun, huh?

"You really came up with some good self-defense measures, huh? All on your own, too?" I asked Karuizawa. I was guessing she'd racked her brains to get here. It was possible X had fed her some ideas… but the chances of that seemed slim.

"Get the picture? Don't you think the best option would be to just quietly let me go?" she shot back in return.

I checked my phone. No texts from anyone. Had my attempt to contact X gone south?

Well, it wasn't like I hadn't known it wouldn't be easy to pin X down. I decided it was time to take things to the next level.

"Look, all you need to do is tell me who X is," I told Karuizawa. "If you know, I'm going to extract it from you one way or another."

This is your fault, X. This is the result of you trying to have your cake and eat it too; both saving Karuizawa and hiding your identity.

"If your threats don't work, how do you intend to make me talk?" she asked.

"That's obvious, isn't it? Torture is a time-honored tradition."

"Ryuuen-san, are you serious?"

"Ibuki, hold Karuizawa down."

"Why me? You can do it yourself, can't you?" Ibuki didn't seem very willing to join in.

"Do it," I commanded.

"I won't be complicit in this. It's too risky," said Ibuki.

"Pathetic. You're wimping out after failing me so many times in a row?" I grabbed the rebellious Ibuki's arm and pulled her close. "This is how you earn back my trust. I'll take responsibility for what happens here. Don't hold back."

"Tch…" Ibuki clicked her tongue, but approached Karuizawa.

"Wh-what?" Karuizawa squeaked.

"Look, I've got problems of my own. Sorry," said Ibuki. She moved behind Karuizawa and grabbed her hands.

"Ow!" shrieked Karuizawa.

Despite Ibuki's initial reluctance, she held Karuizawa easily in place. There was nothing Karuizawa could do against someone with martial arts training.

"Ishizaki, go fill some buckets with water. Let's start with two. There are two cleaning buckets in the men's bathroom one floor below. No one should be using it right now."

"Huh? Water? What for?"

"Are you going to defy me, too?"

"N-no. I'll get them!" Ishizaki panicked and ran past Ibuki, looking

as if he was about to trip over his own feet.

“Now, let’s enjoy a nice little chat until Ishizaki returns,” I said.

“No! Let me go!”

Karuizawa thrashed desperately, but couldn’t break free of Ibuki’s grip. She probably guessed what was going to happen, which was precisely why I was having Ibuki restrain her in the first place—not to prevent her from escaping, but to amplify her fear of what was to come.

“If you lay one finger on me, I’ll tell everyone!” Karuizawa shouted.

“Heh heh. It was pretty cocky of you to show up here. Did you think X would protect you this time, too?” I asked.

No matter how many times I asked her, the answer was the same. She stubbornly refused to admit whether this X person really existed.

“I’m gonna go out on a limb and guess X, Class D’s hidden puppet master, promised to protect you from things like this. Right?” I asked.

Karuizawa’s eyes darted around. She might have thought she was hiding her thoughts, but they were plain for all to see.

“If not, this doesn’t add up. If your past became known, your headstrong, bossy attitude would work to turn people against you, even girls from other classes. Manabe and her friends wouldn’t be the only ones targeting you,” I said.

Ibuki took her eyes off Karuizawa and looked over at me.

“You must spend every day racked with fear that they’ll all learn the truth. But you managed to get this far without your secret getting out. Why? There’s only one possible explanation. It’s because of the person who saved you and supported you.”

“And you think that person’s X?” asked Ibuki.

“For now. But that’s only been the case recently, right?” I asked Karuizawa. “X only learned the truth about your past after your spat with Manabe and her friends. You made Hirata pretend to be your boyfriend to protect yourself, didn’t you?”

Karuizawa’s pupils dilated. “Y-you’re wrong…”

“But I’m not, am I? Don’t lie to me, Karuizawa.” I peered deep into her eyes, as if I could see all the way to the darkness buried within. X must’ve done the same.

“Ah…?!” She was really panicking now. It was cute.

“How could you know that, Ryuuen?” Ibuki sounded shocked, too.

“Chalk it up to experience. I’ve dealt with tons of rotten people in my life,” I told them.

“Ugh…oof. S-sorry to have kept you waiting.” Ishizaki returned, carrying two buckets almost completely full of water. Their contents splashed violently.

Ibuki barraged me with questions again on seeing the buckets.

“You said that there were two buckets. How did you know? Did you investigate this all beforehand”?

“Do you know how many surveillance cameras this school has? I bet you don’t even know that much.”

“Huh? Of course not.”

“You won’t know if you don’t investigate. But if you do your research, you’ll begin to comprehend everything that you see around us,” I told them.

Every day, little by little, I’d scoped out all the locations where surveillance cameras were installed throughout the school. As a result, I’d also learned about the buckets stored in that particular bathroom for cleaning purposes.

“One of the experiments I used to ascertain all this was the time I had Ishizaki and the other guys attack Sudou,” I said. “Because they’re idiots, it seems there was a witness from Class D there at the time.”

As a result of the witness’s presence, Ishizaki and the others had been tricked into confessing by a fake surveillance camera. Ishizaki wore a look of shame on his face as I mentioned the incident. If not for the witness, C Class could have gained quite a bit that time.

“I told you before, Ishizaki, didn’t I? Never admit any wrongdoing.”

“Y-Yes… I was j-just, well, that just shook me a bit…” he stammered.

“The school might appear to strictly enforce a code of behavior, but that’s not entirely true. There are loopholes that allow the use of forceful methods, if you play your cards right,” I continued. There were clues scattered all through our normal, everyday lives to hint at that. “I’m sure you guys don’t get it, but the cleverest members of the student body are the ones constantly testing the boundaries of what the school allows.”

The very first thing I’d done after enrolling at this mysterious school was look for its “rules,” and how to beat them. The second thing I’d done was something vital to understanding the system: test the importance of private points.

“For instance,” I said, “have you ever noticed one particular thing that’s strange about all these tests? The uninhabited island test, the

cruise ship test, the Paper Shuffle—whatever the test, you'd think the senior students would be able to give us some advice, wouldn't you? But if you try and ask them, not a single one will give you a satisfactory answer. Why do you think that is?"

"…Maybe the exams are conducted differently each year? Like, it's possible the rules are different."

"Yeah. I don't think the exams are exactly the same each year. Strictly speaking, though, it's probably more accurate to say the rules *for every grade level* are different."

"What do you mean, Ryuuen-san?"

If you could clear exams by with from senior students, then they'd hardly be exams at all. Everything would just turn into stupid competitions to see who could butter up the seniors more. There had to be rules put in place to prevent that from happening.

"What if there was a supplementary rule that stated 'any second- or third-year students will be expelled immediately if they leak exam contents'?" I asked.

"That's… They would never talk."

"That's right. Even if a freshman asked them, they wouldn't say a word. No way would people who fought to avoid expulsion for a whole year risk getting expelled over making a careless comment. In fact, I tried and utterly failed to negotiate in second-year Class-D students by offering them private points. Proof that talking carries considerable risk."

"But… Well, I suppose you might be right. Komiya and Kondou said something like that a while ago, too. They said they tried to ask some upperclassmen for hints and got nothing. If anything, it kind of felt like they weren't even allowed to ask."

Which was precisely what gave rise to the feeling that it had been forbidden for generations. It was very likely the actual rules were more detailed, but we'd learn them eventually.

"I've always tried to push the boundaries between what's acceptable and what's considered a violation of school rules," I explained. Researching the surveillance cameras, bribing the senior students, and making the back-alley deal with Class A were all part of my experiments to ascertain what I could and couldn't do. "What we're

about to do to Karuizawa is one such experiment, too."

Karuizawa started to shiver in the cold.

"Trauma can be awakened more strongly through the senses than through words," I added.

Based to what Manabe and her friends had told me, the fierce Karuizawa would quickly buckle when subjected to this.

I signaled Ishizaki with one glance. Ibuki pushed Karuizawa forward and then stepped away. In accordance with my orders, Ishizaki dumped a bucket of water on Karuizawa's head.

"Ah!"

Being doused outdoors, in the middle of winter, would chill anyone to the bone. Karuizawa collapsed, shivering, and hugged herself tight. Her bravado was gone, washed away by just one bucket of water.

"Do you remember the baptism you received at your previous school?" I asked.

"N-no!" She covered her ears and sat there, her whole body trembling, as if she were a little girl afraid of ghosts.

"Come on, we're just getting started." I took out my phone and began recording. I pushed Karuizawa's wet bangs from her eyes, watching her spirit begin to break. She was probably flashing back to being bullied right now. "If you won't talk, then I'll circulate this video throughout the school."

That was a lie, but Karuizawa was no longer in any state to tell.

"Come on, scream. Beg me to have mercy."

"N-no!"

The deeper the scars, the more they hurt when you uncovered them.

"I can't watch this. I knew I shouldn't have helped you," said Ibuki, averting her eyes.

"Bullying the weak is pretty fun though, right? It really gets you going."

I thought back to a particular occasion when some people had attacked me, long ago. There was one guy who started out all cocky, but then wound up bawling like a baby when I turned the tables on

him.

Karuizawa's case was a little different.

"Even though you were so persistently bullied, you stood tall in D Class. I'm impressed," I told her. "That's not easily achieved. In a way, you might be a girl with the spirit to stand up to me."

Despite being so weak, she'd held her head high. She'd created a new identity for herself, then maintained that position by using Hirata and through X's protection.

But bullying makes people servile. Once experienced, the trauma is easily reawakened. That's just the way it is.

I crouched beside Karuizawa's trembling form and continued to mock her. "Here's the thing about human nature. People don't change. You were designed to be bullied, not to bully. Remember that."

I picked up the other bucket and dumped the water over Karuizawa.

"…!" Letting out a silent scream, she curled into a ball, shrinking in fear.

"Ishizaki. Get more."

"Y-yes." Ishizaki picked up the two empty buckets and headed downstairs.

"Who's protecting you and keeping Manabe and her friends quiet?" I demanded.

"There's…no one… No one, no one, no one!" Karuizawa screamed. She shook her head fervently.

"Heh. Still trying to hide it? I guess you *do* have spirit. Or maybe it's just that you're so used to being bullied? Maybe this doesn't even qualify as bullying for you." I grabbed Karuizawa's arm and yanked her to her feet.

"I can't watch this," Ibuki said again.

"This is where the fun begins," I said.

"You're evil. This is disgusting." But Ibuki didn't leave. She leaned up against the door instead. "I'll leave after you get a name out of her," she said.

"Fine by me."

I wasn’t doing this to entertain Ibuki. I was breaking Karuizawa for my own pleasure.

5.3

I WAS FREEZING. Icy water dripped from my hair. They'd dumped water over me four times now. My uniform was soaked right through; even my underwear was wet. But what scared me wasn't the way my body violently trembling from the cold. What scared me was the ice in my heart.

I was facing down a deep darkness, so intense and bitter that it made me hate the entire world.

Why am I being bullied? Slowly, my feelings changed to, *Why am I alive? What did I do wrong?*

I started blaming myself. My heart was frozen and my body was being devoured. The deep scars etched into my being started to throb again, like they were hot.

"Come on. That's enough, Karuizawa. Make things easier on yourself. There's no need to suffer any further," Ryuuen sneered.

That was a dead end, though. If I told him about Kiyotaka, it might reprieve me temporarily, but there was no guarantee that Ryuuen wouldn't try to blackmail me again. He might even command me to betray Class D. Like the tragic finales you saw on television, misery was all that awaited people who continued to betray others.

I would hold on to hope until the very end. I'd believe in Kiyotaka's words, and his promise that he'd protect me. That was my final defense against my heart being swallowed up by the darkness.

"I know what you're thinking. If you give up X, you'll lose their protection. All hope will be lost," said Ryuuen.

My teeth loudly chattered from the cold, making my terror audible to all. I struggled desperately to stop, but my mind had already abandoned me. Repulsive memories thrashed around in my brain. The past and present overlapped.

“Do you want to die holding onto hope? Are you okay with going back to the way things were?” Ryuuen’s vicious words cut me. “X can’t save you. *I* can, if you give me their name.”

I was scared.

“If you won’t cooperate, though, I have no choice but to destroy you.”

Save me.

“I’m going to list everything there is to know about you, everything you pretend to be, and circulate it to the whole school.”

I’m scared.

“When that happens, will you be able to keep your position in your class? Will you still be a leader?”

Save me.

“No. You’ll just go back to being what you were before. You’ll be back to the real you, that pathetic girl who was always bullied.”

The cruel memories of the bullying I’d endured long ago continued to play in my head on loop. I never wanted to return to that dark, miserable world where all I could think about was how much I wanted to die.

“No, no, no no no! No no no no!”

“Then make things easier. Protect yourself.”

“Please, forgive me! Please, forgive me!”

My pride had already shattered. No, that wasn’t true. It’d shattered before, and I’d clumsily pieced it back together with tape. The Karuizawa Kei who made a new life for herself was dying. I could feel my second chance at a happy school life crumbling into dust.

“I’m not merciful like Manabe and her friends,” said Ryuuen. “We know your secret. Even if you get me expelled, it’s not just me who knows. I’ll spread rumors of your past. Your own classmates will smell blood in the water and turn on you!”

“No, no, no…”

“Then remember. Remember how painful it’ll be to go back to how you used to be.”

Even though I hated it, I remembered.

For a moment, my mind went completely blank. All I saw was endless white. And then immediately after, there was darkness.

Despite myself, I remembered. I remembered junior high and the hell I'd created for myself over the most trivial of things. I was stubborn, headstrong, and right after starting school, I made enemies of the other girls for no reason. What followed was a completely nightmare.

Writing hateful graffiti on my textbooks and throwing my notebooks away? That was just cute. They dumped water on me while I used the bathroom. More than once. It even became a routine. They punched and kicked me. They recorded me getting beaten up and circulated the videos. They put thumbtacks in my shoes and dead animals in my desk.

I remembered all of it.

They pulled my skirt down in front of our classmates. They hid my underwear and uniform after swimming class. They made me confess romantic feelings to boys I didn't actually like. They made me lick their shoes. They even made me pick garbage off the ground and eat it.

I remembered experiencing one humiliation after another.

Yes, that was right.

I remembered.

In times like these, the defense people have is to just accept whatever happens. After a while, I learned to do that. To accept reality. Accept that Ryuuen and his follower were bullying me again. It would be easier if I just accepted it.

Was I really going back to those days? If that happened, I knew my heart couldn't take it. I couldn't endure it if the girls who were now kind to me, who were my friends, started to change.

My old school had abandoned me. The only good thing it ever did for me was tell me about *this* school. They threw me a lifeline by letting me go someplace where no one knew me. If no one knew me, then I—

I looked up at the sky as tears ran down my face.

Why do I have to suffer like this?

No. I didn't want this.

That feeling began to grow within me.

I didn't want to go back.

Ryuuen said he just wanted to find the person he was looking for. In other words, if I gave him Kiyotaka's name, I'd be free. But there was no guarantee he wouldn't reveal my past anyway. It might be public knowledge come tomorrow. If that happened, I wouldn't just lose Kiyotaka's trust, but all my friends.

But—

It was still possible. I might be saved. If I just gave him Kiyotaka's name, it was possible this cruel, painful torture would come to an end.

I'll save you.

Kiyotaka had promised me that, but he wasn't here. Even if I kept faith in him, that didn't change my current situation. Didn't he see the message I sent him? I'd also looked at him, begged him quietly. Our eyes had met. He definitely saw me.

He told me he'd protect me. Had I just imagined it? Had I been a fool to believe him? I didn't know anymore. There was no way I could be sure, anymore. Our relationship was far too shallow. He cut me off with no guarantee he'd keep Manabe and her friends at bay. He quoted selfish reasons like how it was no longer necessary for him to manipulate the class further.

I was just an afterthought. Had I been betrayed? Had he abandoned me?

"Do you see anyone coming, Albert? I see." Ryuuen sighed quietly, standing in front of me, "I assume you're holding on to the hope that someone's coming to save you. But it doesn't look like it."

Ah. So, I'd been abandoned after all. Well, what was I supposed to do, now if not believe? Kiyotaka had told me he'd save me. And the truth of the matter was that he *did* protect me from Manabe and her friends.

"It seems like you trust X quite a bit, Karuizawa." Ryuuen sighed in exasperation. "You were tricked."

"No, that's wrong."

"I'm not wrong. I'll tell you the truth about the cruise ship test. The truth X never told you."

“The tr-truth?”

Ryuuen’s smile disappeared.

“Manabe wanted to get back at you for being mean to her friend, Morofuji, but she couldn’t find a good opportunity to do it. I mean, even if she tried to summon you somewhere secluded, it wasn’t like you’d show up. But then, for some reason, you went down to the lowest floor alone. Why?”

“That was—” Because Yousuke-kun had asked me to. Back then, I’d been emotionally unstable. I’d had no choice but to rely on Yousuke-kun, the host I attached myself to like a parasite. That was why I went.

Then Manabe and her friends showed up…

“Do you *really* think that was a coincidence?”

Once again, Ryuuen saw right through me.

“Manabe and her friends couldn’t follow you around all the time, especially not on such a big ship. Them showing up wasn’t coincidental, but an inevitability.”

So Yousuke-kun had tricked me?

No…

That couldn’t be.

I knew right away that that wasn’t it.

“You know it already, don’t you? X secretly contacted Manabe and then set you up. They tricked Manabe by claiming they hated you too, and would help her get you. You were an idiot for taking the bait so easily.”

I *did* remember how strange it’d seemed. Yousuke-kun asked me to meet him there, but in the end, he never showed. I understood now that Kiyotaka had instructed Yousuke-kun to get me there alone.

“X set you up. They intentionally let Manabe bully you so they could record it to use against her. Unjust of them, don’t you think?”

I wanted to tell him that he was wrong. But what Ryuuen was saying… I couldn’t easily deny it. So, Kiyotaka showing to save me wasn’t coincidence, either?

“You weren’t saved. You were trapped. Pretty stupid, huh?”

I’d been…tricked?

“Look around you. Is X here right now? Is X saving you?”

Kiyotaka…had been deceiving me from the very start?

“It’s safe to assume that X cut all ties with you when their identity was about to be exposed,” Ryuuen said.

No, that wasn’t…

That couldn’t be…

I…can’t be saved. Even though I’m suffering so much…

I’d been caught in Kiyotaka’s trap. He let me think he might save me. He even made me help him with so much stuff. But at the crucial moment, when I needed him, he abandoned me.

“You finally get it, yeah? That’s right. You’ve just been bullied all over again.”

I was completely shrouded in dark. I couldn’t escape this never-ending vicious circle of bullying.

“Well, there’s still one way for you to save yourself,” said Ryuuen.

A name.

Kiyotaka’s name.

“That’s right. It’ll all be over.” Ryuuen laughed again, as if reading my mind. “If you give me the name, I promise never to bother you again.”

If I give Ryuuen his name, will this be over…?

All I had to say was “Ayanokouji Kiyotaka.” I didn’t know if I could believe Ryuuen. But if he heard the words emerging from the bottom of my heart, I was sure he’d understand. It was the *only* thing I was sure of right now.

Against my will, my trembling lips began to part. Despair and anger at being betrayed rose up to fill my heart. But no sound came out. It was too cold to speak.

“Just take it slow. Give me the name.”

“K…” I was trembling all over, shaking with fear, but finally got one sound out.

“K…?” Ryuuen repeated the noise back to me.

“K…t…” Slowly, very slowly, I managed to squeeze more sounds

out of my throat. This was it. If I did this, I'd be free.

"One more time." Ryuuen put his face closer to mine.

"K-knock…it…off. No matter how many times…"

The words were coming out now, but they weren't *those* words. I'd never had any intention of telling him.

Because I…wouldn't…

"No matter how many times you ask me…I'll never, ever tell you…creep."

At that, Ryuuen's smile vanished. It felt like a single ray of light pierced the cloudy sky. My words hadn't changed at all, but with those words, I'd made my choice.

"Even if I lose everything I built at this school starting tomorrow… No matter how much you put me through…" These weren't Ryuuen's words or Kiyotaka's. They were *mine*. And they were something I could believe in, no matter what. "I'll never give you the name."

Warmth flooded my chest.

"Are you certain, Karuizawa?"

Yes.

I'm okay with this.

I might come to regret it.

But, I'm okay with it…!

"Even though X was just using you, why you're still protecting him?"

I wanted to ask myself the same question.

"I don't know why." But there was one thing I did know. "I want to stand tall until the very end!"

My vision, which had grown hazy, suddenly sharpened once more.

"I see. That's too bad, Karuizawa. I don't want to do this, but you've left me no choice. Still, you have my respect. Despite all your trauma, and the one person you could rely on betraying you, you didn't sell him out. I honestly admire you."

This is fine.

This is fine.

I kept telling myself that. I was going to be broken, now, but somehow, I couldn't help but feel proud of myself. Even though he'd betrayed me, I hadn't betrayed him. I'd protected him. If I could somehow help him find the peace he sought, that wouldn't be so bad, would it? It even made me pretty cool. Right?

My life had never been very interesting, except when I worked with Kiyotaka. Helping him out with all his different schemes wasn't so bad. In fact, it was exciting. I had fun. I felt like I was playing the role of supporting actress, aiding the hero from the wings. I didn't understand a lot of what we were doing, but somehow, it was extraordinarily fun.

Besides, no matter what happened, the truth was that he'd saved me. That was why I had no regrets.

But, well…deep down, I still hoped he'd come and save me. Those fleeting feelings within me were…real, I guess. Ah, I was such an idiot. I'd only ever been dancing in the palm of his hand. Guess you reap what you sow, huh?

First Yousuke-kun, then Kiyotaka, had protected me. I was a girl who couldn't do anything on her own.

Somehow, underneath the cold winter sky, I felt glad.

Goodbye, fake me.

Welcome home to the cold, empty Karuizawa of the past.

ADVANCED NURTURING HIGH SCHOOL

First-Year Class B Teacher Evaluation

Class Point Total as of 12/1:

753

UP UNTIL SUMMER VACATION

Class B got along well with Ichinose-san as their leader. I expected more internal conflict, but it looks like they're on track to give it their best over the next three years.

THE DESERTED ISLAND TEST

Class B spent a whole week having fun, training, and enhancing their teamwork, rather than trying to win. I find them really wonderful kids, more so than any other class.

THE CRUISE SHIP TEST

It seems that Class B didn't perform well because they weren't very good at suspicion or subterfuge. Even so, their strong resolve and honesty should see them through to Class A.

THE SPORTS FESTIVAL

Class B worked extremely hard, striving to be open and honest with Class C, who aren't very friendly. I wish Ryuuen-kun would learn to cooperate a little more.

THE PAPER SHUFFLE

Although Class B unfortunately lost to Class A, I really want these cheerful, positive kids to rise to the top.

Chapter 6:
Intersecting Thoughts

ROUGHLY TWO HOURS before Karuizawa left to see Ryuuen, Chabashira-sensei lectured us about important things to remember during the upcoming winter vacation.

"Parts of the school will undergo renovations, so those areas will be off-limits. Also, all clubs will take the day off after the closing ceremony. Be sure to head back as soon as you can."

For some reason, our teacher gazed soundlessly around the classroom after she was done speaking. We waited, but she showed no sign of dismissing us.

Ike, clearly itching to leave, raised his hand. "What's the matter, Sensei?"

"I'm sure that many of you are already aware of this, but your promotion to Class C is almost guaranteed. Well done."

"W-wow. Sensei just praised us. This is rare." Ike wasn't the only one who felt that way. I was sure the rest of the class was equally amazed.

"However, don't get sloppy. If you get in trouble over the break, it might affect your class points. Don't forget, even during the holidays, you represent this school." With that, Chabashira-sensei dismissed us, bringing the second semester to a close.

"This really is unusual," said Ike. "Chabashira-sensei being nice and giving us a warning, I mean."

"Yeah, you might be right," I replied.

As I put my textbooks in my bag, I glanced over at Karuizawa, who was talking with some other girls. She turned and looked back at me.

That morning, I'd received a text from Karuizawa at the email address I reserved for emergencies. The message said that Ryuuen had asked to meet her on the roof at two o'clock today, and that it had something to do with Manabe and her friends.

Having already gotten a message from Ryuuen about the meeting, I was unsurprised. Ryuuen didn't care if Karuizawa tattled on him. His only goal was to lure me in.

I didn't reply to Karuizawa's text. And yet, she left the room with her friends looking satisfied, perhaps because she felt confident that I'd gotten her message. Maybe she intended to leave the classroom and then come back. An hour later, though, almost all the students had left the school building.

"Hey, we were talking about going over to Keyaki Mall. What do you think? Want to come?" asked Keisei.

"Sure," I said. "I don't have anything planned. I'll head over after I finish getting ready."

"We'll wait in the hall."

Maybe I should take some textbooks back to the dorm with me, just in case? I might need them over break.

"Hey. Are you busy today, by any chance?" Satou called, sounding rather sheepish.

"Yeah. I just promised Yukimura and the others I'd go hang out with them," I replied.

"I-I see. Bad luck, I guess," said Satou, her shoulders slumping.

"…Today's no good, but are you free over the winter break?" I asked.

"Huh?"

"I mean, I feel bad for turning you down twice now. If you're okay with it, Satou, I just thought…"

"R-really?!"

"Y-yeah."

Satou hugged me without warning, leaving me a little overwhelmed. "I-It's a date!" she said, hopping up and down while blushing.

Why in the world was she so interested in me? I wasn't complaining, exactly, but there were still people in the classroom. This was kind of embarrassing.

"Anytime tomorrow or after is good," I said. "I'll send you a

message with more details."

"Got it! See you later, Ayanokouji-kun!"

Beaming, Satou rejoined Shinohara and her group, who eyed me suspiciously before leaving. I went over to Keisei and the others, who were gathered in the hallway, chatting among themselves. I could guess what they were discussing, based on Haruka's creepy grin and Airi's downhearted expression. Haruka seemed ready to start trouble as we began walking, so I beat her to the punch.

"Nothing's going on," I told them.

"I haven't even asked you anything," said Haruka. "What's up?"

"Nothing's up. You were about to ask something, that's all."

"I mean, yeah. Just looking at Satou-san, it's not hard to imagine that *something's* going on, right?"

"You're such a playboy, Kiyotaka. First Horikita, now Satou?" said Keisei. For some reason, he sounded kind of angry.

I decided I'd better offer some clarification. "She just invited me to hang out with her, that's all."

"A girl inviting a boy out is rare, though. There must be something to it, don't you think?" asked Haruka.

"Y-y-you don't think that S-Satou-san is interested in Kiyotaka-kun, do you?!" asked Airi frantically. We'd already been through this.

"I don't know how to answer that…" I said.

"A last-ditch effort to find romance just in time for Christmas? Oh, my," added Haruka. "What an *amazing* turn of events!"

"At any rate, where are we going? The mall's probably pretty crowded today. Since break starts tomorrow, there should be quite a few students hanging out until late tonight," said Keisei, pressing us to make a decision.

"Well, can't we just kinda wander? We don't have to rush," replied Haruka.

As we talked, Akito walked along silently, his expression stern. He seemed to be concentrating on whatever was behind us, as if searching for someone.

"No sign of anyone tailing us," he mumbled, sounding relieved.

It seemed that Ryuuen planned on settling things once and for all today. He must've decided that following us was no longer necessary.

"Hey, you know, even though Keyaki Mall's got pretty much everything, I think I wanna go off campus after all," said Haruka, looking into the distance at the main entrance. "I really want to go to Shibuya or Harajuku, or see the lights in Omotesando, you know?"

"I suppose campus isn't a good substitute for either of those places, other than the inside of Keyaki Mall…" The school hadn't really decorated the campus roads for the occasion, so everything looked the same as usual.

"I'm okay with staying here…" said Airi. "Plus, the campus has almost everything we need. Do you feel the same as Haruka, Kiyotaka-kun? About going off campus?"

Unlike Haruka, Airi definitely didn't strike me as the kind of person who liked to hit the town at night. I supposed it would be okay if I didn't force myself to be carried along for once.

"I'm happy to stay here, Airi. But I get why people want to go off campus," I replied.

"I know that it's in the school rules, but isn't saying that we can't contact our families for three years kind of extreme? I mean, you'd think people would be concerned about their kids, right?" Maybe this was a tender subject for Akito, because he was glowering. "My mom's a worrywart. She's probably really anxious," he added.

"I've heard that the school takes care of that. Apparently, they regularly send out report cards and stuff."

"That…might worry her even more. Guess I should study a little harder," Akito said.

"Parents probably worry more about girls than boys, though."

"Ah, no worries. That's not the case with me. My family's fine," said Haruka, smoothly dodging the topic. It seemed there might be something that she didn't want to touch on. "So, are we heading over to karaoke? It might be a bit crowded."

"We're not going to play that punishment game again, are we?" asked Keisei.

"Of course we are. So Yukimuu can have his revenge."

As everyone chatted about where we were going next, I stopped in my tracks.

“What’s the matter, Kiyotaka-kun?”

“Sorry,” I said. “I’m heading back.”

“But it’s only two,” Akito said, checking the time on his phone.

“To tell you the truth, I pulled an all-nighter, and I’m kind of beat. Let’s hang out again over the winter break,” I told them.

Airi looked disappointed, but I trusted Haruka to make sure that she had a good time, even without me around. I said my goodbyes to the group and left, pulling out my phone to call Chabashira-sensei once I was a safe distance away.

“Hello. I need to talk to you about something. Do you have a moment?” I asked.

“What are you planning? Didn’t you wash your hands of me?” replied Chabashira-sensei.

“Yes, but there’re still a few loose ends that need tying up. I’d like to discuss this in person. Can we meet at school?”

“I’ll wait in the classroom,” she replied.

“Understood. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

I returned to our classroom, which was now empty of students. Chabashira-sensei stood near my seat, looking out the window.

“If this is like previous years, it’ll probably snow,” she said.

“Do you like snow?”

“I used to. Then I grew up and came to hate it.” Chabashira-sensei pulled the curtains shut and turned around. “You said that you have something to discuss. What do you want with me?”

“I was just wondering. Why do you want to make it to Class A so badly that you’d go so far as to use me to do it?” You’d think a teacher might hesitate to lie and manipulate a student unless she had good reason for it.

“This school’s designed to make teachers, as well as students, compete with one another. It’s only natural that everyone wants to rise up the ranks.”

“I can’t imagine that’s all there is to it. If you really aimed for

Class A from the very beginning, you'd never have put Class D at a disadvantage the way you did." During our first midterm exam, Chabashira-sensei had deliberately withheld critical information from us.

"That's different. It was personal. I have nothing to say to you," she replied.

"You hesitated, right? You weren't sure this class really had the ability to aim for Class A. You weren't sure it was even worth trying." I didn't really care what her secret feelings were. The important thing was whether she could be of use to me.

"It seems that this is a waste of time. I'm going back to work."

I spoke up again as Chabashira-sensei turned to leave. "If you won't answer, then you might as well give up on trying to use me."

"Is that what this is about? I thought you already wriggled free of my grasp, didn't you?"

"This is crucial. If you don't take action now, Class D will never make it to Class A. If anything, it's unlikely we'll even reach Class C."

"What are you talking about?"

I looked at the clock on the wall, making it obvious that I was checking the time. "It's already two p.m. Ryuuen is putting on a very interesting show right about now, after calling Karuizawa to the roof."

"Ryuuen called Karuizawa?"

"So, even you don't know, Sensei? Karuizawa was horribly bullied in the past."

"This is the first I'm hearing of it."

"That information will probably be all over the school tomorrow. When that happens, Karuizawa will retreat into her shell, and maybe even voluntarily drop out of school. If we can prove Class C was responsible, we might be able to retaliate, but the damage done to each class will be unfathomable," I told her.

I didn't know what the penalty to Class D would be for someone dropping out, but it was probably bad. I could tell that much just from looking at Chabashira-sensei's face.

However, she immediately regained her composure and fixed me with her usual intense gaze. "I see your ulterior motive. You can't

resolve this situation on your own, but a teacher has powers you don't, and I could help conceal your involvement. A perfect resolution, yes?"

"So, you'll help me?" I asked.

"Don't get carried away, Ayanokouji. I have no intention of cooperating with you," she said.

"Naturally."

"The school doesn't exactly look kindly on teachers intervening in problems between students."

True enough. A teacher going up to the rooftop alone, not just to stop Ryuuen from bullying Karuizawa, but also to prevent word of Karuizawa's past from getting out…it was a dream scenario, too perfect to ever come true.

"Can you really afford to turn me down?" I replied. "There's no guarantee that I won't do anything to sabotage Class D in the future, is there? I'm more than capable of ensuring we never rise through the ranks."

"To think that a student would threaten a teacher. The tables have certainly turned."

"If you do this for me, I promise I'll do nothing to hinder or sabotage Class D going forward. I think that's significant, don't you?" I asked.

"If refusing to help you with this means that we never make it to Class A, then so be it."

Well, then. It looked like Chabashira-sensei wasn't going to budge. Fortunately, relying on a teacher for help never once factored into my calculations.

"Relax," I said. "I had no intention of recruiting your assistance."

"What?"

"I was just testing you, that's all. So, why not come observe this little drama's conclusion?"

6.1

IF ALL WAS GOING in accordance with my predictions, about thirty minutes should've passed since Karuizawa went to the roof. Chabashira-sensei and I waited a safe distance from where Yamada Albert stood guard, watching as Ishizaki came downstairs looking panicked and went back up with buckets of water. Judging by the amount of water spilled on the floor, he must've done this several times. Probably part of Ryuuen's scheme to force Karuizawa to relive her past trauma in order to get her to confess.

However, Karuizawa must not have spilled the beans right away, because neither she nor the Class C students showed any sin of coming back down. It was possible things were going slightly differently from how I'd envisioned. Still, putting my initial assumptions aside, this was a change for the better.

"What are you planning, Ayanokouji? How long do you intend to wait?" asked Chabashira-sensei.

Just a little longer. I'd come this far; I didn't need to rush to take action. The further I let the situation on the roof develop, the more likely it became that things would go my way. Being late carried its own risk, but a necessary one.

"Let's chat," I said.

"Right now?" Chabashira-sensei asked, incredulous.

I ignored her response. "I'd like to discuss something that happened shortly after we started school, back when we wanted you to sell us one point for Sudou's test."

"Yes, I remember. You and Horikita together paid a hundred thousand points for that."

It'd been over six months since then. Time sure did fly.

"There's nothing you cannot buy with private points. That's what you said, right?" I asked.

"That's true. Sudou wasn't expelled, was he?"

"If purchasing points was permissible, there would never be any

expulsions, would there? Any time someone got a failing grade, someone else could cover for them the way we did."

"It's not that easy to get private points. This year's Class D has managed to accumulate a decent number, but that's a departure from normal. Most years, Class D has about half that amount. Besides, not every student in the class gets along. At least not enough to use their private points to save a classmate, even if that means accepting a drop in class points," she countered.

"True. But that's a flaw in the system, isn't it? If salvation through private points is always an option, it dramatically lowers the danger of expulsion based on test performance," I reasoned.

"That might be true." Chabashira-sensei didn't deny it, but she didn't look me in the eye, either.

"Back when I asked you to sell us that single point, you added a value to it, Chabashira-sensei."

"Do you think it was too expensive?" she asked.

"No, that's not what I mean. I'm asking whether exchanging one test point for one hundred thousand private points was something you came up with on the spot, or if you had some basis for attaching that price to it. At the time, I thought you sounded like you came up with it off the top of your head, but since then, I've come to doubt you arbitrarily decided that on your own without consulting the school."

"What are you trying to say, Ayanokouji?"

"This school has taken great care to legislate, in writing, all matters related to points, hasn't it? It's not far-fetched to think that it might've anticipated someone trying to purchase a test score increase. I would believe it."

"In other words, you're asking whether the price I named you and Horikita was something that the school decided on in advance?" she asked.

"That's right. If you can answer, please do."

There was a pause. Chabashira-sensei, who'd had a ready reply to my every query thus far, was silent.

"It's not like I can answer any question you ask of me," she said.

"Should I interpret that to mean you *can't* answer?" I asked.

“Think whatever you want.”

“Very well. I’ll happily draw my own conclusions. The school prepared a manual to consult in every conceivable situation. It was determined in advance that it cost one hundred thousand private points to purchase one test point. If we go from there, it begs the question: can we can purchase one test point for a hundred thousand private points on more than one occasion?”

“Speculate as you wish, but this is an odd conversation, given the circumstances. Karuizawa is—”

I cut Chabashira-sensei off. “Is the hundred thousand points per test point rate only available for a limited time after we’ve enrolled? Does the price go up every time we make a purchase? Or are we only allowed to make such a purchase once? The more I think about it, the more questions I have. Please tell me if I’m correct.”

“Enough. Do you think I can answer those questions? Even if I were able to, there’s no way you could confirm the truth.”

“There is. I just need to ask you directly, Sensei.” She tried to avert her eyes, but I wasn’t budging. “How many points would I need to buy one test point on the next midterm right now?”

“……” Chabashira-sensei went completely silent.

“As a teacher, you’re obligated to answer that question, right? If you won’t, I’ll go ahead and ask another teacher. And if they answer me, I’ll report to the school that Class D’s homeroom teacher is discriminating against us. Don’t forget that I can do that,” I told her.

Of course, it was possible that the other teachers would be similarly prevented from answering, in which case I could imagine several possibilities. There might be a rule that stated they could only sell us points once, or that they could only do so if someone would otherwise get a failing grade.

Even so, her inability to answer was an answer in and of itself. It told me there was established procedure to be followed in situations like these.

“Are you trying to find a gap in the rules?” Chabashira-sensei asked me.

“A few students are already doing just that, aren’t they? Look at Ichinose and Ryuuen, both accumulating private points.” They were

each trying to find a strategy that benefited their respective classes, undergoing a process of trial and error every day.

"Understood. Very well, I'll answer your question. It's true that the key to beating the system lies in understanding the actual rules surrounding private point use. Students from previous years have approached the problem from various perspectives, as you're doing now. Even Class D, the collection of 'defective products', is no exception. Some students have been quicker than others on the uptake, though. Additionally, the school has established thousands of detailed rules to cover every possible scenario. Buying and selling points, sweeping violent incidents under the rug, preventing expulsion—there's a point value attached to every single one of those. However, teachers are very limited in what we're allowed to reveal or allude to. In fact, we're prohibited from revealing most of this information. There might even be rules the teachers aren't aware of yet."

"So, you truly can't answer my question?"

"Correct."

One mystery solved. Our teachers could only reveal the private points' special uses to us when certain conditions were met. In other words, the price of buying a point for the next midterm had already been set; I just hadn't met the conditions necessary for Chabashira-sensei to disclose that information to me. Now that I knew that, I could begin to devise countermeasures, though the ambiguity would keep us from being too reckless.

"Does this conversation have anything to do with what's happening now?" asked Chabashira-sensei.

"Not at all. I was just having a friendly chat," I replied. Chabashira-sensei had no idea what my real intentions were. "I suppose it's time, wouldn't you say? Time for this game to be over."

I checked my phone and saw that it was past 2:40 p.m. I sent a certain person a message instructing them to come here immediately.

"I don't fully understand what's happening, but I do know that Karuizawa is suffering terribly at Class C's hands. If you have no intention of stepping up, you should call someone else," said Chabashira-sensei.

"I'm heading to the roof," I replied.

Chabashira-sensei couldn't hide her surprise. "Are you insane? If you do, the entire school will know your identity."

"It doesn't matter. Even if Ryuuen learns that I orchestrated all Class D's strategies so far, he now gains nothing. If anything, he might assume I'm involved next time, and end up sabotaging himself."

"If you do this, you'll be the talk of the school. You'll destroy all possibility of leading a quiet life here."

I could guess at the thought smoldering within her mind. Chabashira-sensei was probably thinking that as long as my identity remained hidden, she had leverage to make me cooperate. But if I revealed myself to Class C, Ryuuen would know for certain that I was X. Even if he didn't know for sure, it would all be over as soon as he decided I was his prime suspect.

Chabashira-sensei looked away. "Perhaps I was mistaken," she said.

"Mistaken?"

"Chairman Sakayanagi told me about you before you enrolled. He said that you were an extremely special student. A superior one. And that you were a student we must protect. That you were raised in an environment that was far from loving. The chairman and I concluded, after much discussion, that we wanted you to feel attached to this school, and to want to stay here. Then I told you that your father wanted you expelled. It wasn't true at the time, but it appears to be now," she explained.

"I see. Well, you were certainly correct that it's easier for people to become attached to something if they have a goal to strive for. But you needn't worry. I choose to stay here. I have no intention of going back to being under that man's control."

"So, my mistake was in trying to use you so carelessly, hmm? I suppose I got carried away, chasing my pipe dream of Class D overtaking Class A." Chabashira-sensei spat those words with resignation. Ironic how quickly she was giving up on her ambitions.

"It's not a pipe dream. Class D is about to rise to Class C. Soon, Horikita will unite our class. I'm sure of it," I replied.

"I suppose. You've already achieved what past classes haven't. Do you really think Horikita can do that, though?"

“Such skepticism is unbecoming of a teacher. Horikita is more than capable of leading Class D.”

It seemed Chabashira-sensei only saw Horikita as a means to manipulate me, no more.

“Ultimately,” I said. “Horikita is starting to mature. The same goes for many of our classmates. Continue to guide them as their teacher, and our position as Class C will be secure…and so might our path to Class A.” Of course, we’d need some very different skills to get that far.

“Are you really planning to step back?”

“Yes.”

Teachers were almost certainly forbidden from trying to manipulate students’ emotions to gratify their own. Chabashira-sensei had to be well aware of that. I hadn’t brought her here to act as insurance; I’d done it so I could prove to her once and for all that I was stepping back from actively participating in inter-class competition.

“Back to the topic at hand. You’re free to make your grand entrance and expose your identity. But will that really resolve the problem?” she asked.

“I can’t guarantee it. At most, I can say I’ll deal with the situation based on my evaluation of Ryuuen’s personality and behavior.” I caught sight of the person I’d texted approaching us. Chabashira-sensei was free to leave if she wanted, now. It would no longer hinder me. “Well then, thank you very much for accompanying me this far.”

As I said that, the person I’d texted joined us.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting, Ayanokouji,” said Horikita Manabu, the former student council president.

Chabashira-sensei looked shocked to see him. “What’s going on?”

“He’s here as a witness. After all, Ryuuen will try to win by any means necessary, and I’d like to avoid this becoming violent.”

Having a teacher stand witness was the ultimate trump card, of course, but not as feasible to implement. I’d chosen to use the next best thing.

“Are you planning to have Horikita go to the rooftop in your place?”

“Does the former student council president look like someone

who'd ever do that sort of thing?"

Chabashira-sensei looked over the elder Horikita for a moment, and immediately arrived at the conclusion that it was impossible.

"There will be a person on the rooftop who will witness what happens there. As long as that holds true, then we'll be fine," I concluded.

It was for that purpose that I'd come to an agreement with Horikita's brother. Not that that was relevant right now.

I turned to the elder Horikita. "A few minutes after I head up, I'd like you to stop halfway up the stairs. There's no need for you to talk to the students who come back down from the roof, nor is it necessary to punish them. Just make sure they see you on their way down. I need them to be aware you were here."

"That's fine, but don't forget our arrangement, Ayanokouji," he replied.

"Of course. If I go back on my word, you may choose to forget what happens here today," I said.

"As long as you understand. Try to wrap this up quickly."

"Wait, Ayanokouji. What would you have done if Horikita didn't agree to help?" asked Chabashira-sensei as I started down the hallway that led to the rooftop.

"Hmm. Who knows?"

I probably would've used Sakayanagi instead, since she knew about me. And if that weren't possible, then… Well, there was no point in thinking about plans I no longer needed to be.

"I'll be back in ten or twenty minutes."

6.2

I CLIMBED THE STAIRS step by step. A shadow loomed in front of me, blocking the path to the roof. It was Yamada Albert, the perfect gatekeeper for the task. I didn't know much about him, other than the fact that he was one of Ryuuen's underlings.

He looked me over as if sizing me up. "May I pass?" I asked.

He continued watching me, not moving a muscle. Did his silence imply refusal, or did he not understand? His large hands swiftly withdrew his phone.

"Don't panic. I'm the one you want," I said to him in English.

Albert stopped moving, but said nothing,

"I'm ending this today. No one else will interfere," I added.

Albert seemed to give this some thought. He stood aside and silently signaled me to pass, apparently having acknowledged me, but I needed him on the roof for what was to come.

"I intend to crush Ryuuen. He doesn't stand a chance without your help," I told him, switching back to Japanese.

Albert looked downstairs once more. After he confirmed that there wasn't anyone else around, he followed me to the roof, stopping by the door and watching me from behind.

The gray clouds hanging in the sky threatened rain. I saw Karuizawa near the fence, cowering away from the door. Having noticed the door open and close, Ishizaki and Ibuki looked over at me, as did Ryuuen. I checked the area for surveillance cameras, noting that the sole camera's lens was painted black. He'd covered it with spray paint, huh?

I turned my gaze back toward Ryuuen.

"Ayano…kouji?" asked Ibuki incredulously. She was the first to speak.

Karuizawa had noticed me. She said nothing, but I could tell that she was shocked and wondering why I'd come.

“Sorry I’m late,” I told her.

“Why…why did you come?” asked Karuizawa, barely squeezing out the words.

“What do you mean, ‘why’? I made a promise, didn’t I? I promised that I’d save you.”

“R-Ryuuen-san, does this mean Ayanokouji is X?!” Ishizaki panicked.

“There’s no way. It definitely can’t be him,” Ibuki denied before Ryuuen could say anything. “X is just using Ayanokouji. Don’t be fooled, Ryuuen. X probably told Karuizawa in advance that he’d send someone to come and save her!”

“Shut up, Ibuki.”

Ryuuen laughed, putting distance between himself and Karuizawa as he drew closer to me. He stopped about five meters away, clearly wary.

“Well, well. Who do we have here? It’s that guy who clings to Suzune all the time. Ayanokouji, huh? What brings you all alone to the rooftop on this fine first day of winter vacation?”

“Karuizawa emailed me. She said she wanted me to save her.” I deliberately failed to mention that Ryuuen himself also contacted me. As for why I was here…it was because Ryuuen, thinking himself the hunter, had foolishly invited me to the hunting ground to turn him into prey instead.

“Oh?”

“It’s obviously a lie,” said Ibuki. “You came here on someone else’s orders, Ayanokouji.”

“What’s the matter, Ibuki?” asked Ryuuen. “It seems you want to believe that Ayanokouji isn’t X.”

“It’s not about what I want to believe. I’m telling you; he *can’t* be. He’s… This guy’s stupidly good-natured. He’s a softie. Besides, he probably doesn’t even know about Karuizawa, and X, and everything—don’t you think?”

“Good-natured? What makes you say that?” asked Ryuuen.

“When we were on the island, I hid Karuizawa’s underwear in a boy’s bag to sabotage Class D. Everyone went straight to suspecting me,

since I'm from Class C—except Ayanokouji. He even told me straight out that he didn't think I'd done it."

"Did that make you happy?"

"Quit joking around. Of course it didn't make me happy; I *was* actually guilty of the crime. It just told me that he's an incompetent student who doesn't know how to doubt someone clearly suspicious." In other words, she couldn't imagine someone like that being able to manipulate Class D from the shadows.

“Do *you* believe it, Ryuuen-san? That Ayanokouji’s X?” asked Ishizaki.

“I’ve had my eye on Ayanokouji from the start. He’s always clinging to Horikita, who’s reputed to be quite exceptional herself.”

“But that’s so obvious… isn’t that way too out in the open for someone trying to hide their identity?”

“Certainly. I understand what you’re trying to say, Ishizaki. That’s why I made sure to very carefully narrow down my list of suspects. After I learned about the incident with Manabe and her friends, certain candidates resurfaced as my primary suspects. When I considered the speed and means by which Karuizawa’s bullying incident had been dealt with, I thought it had to be either Ayanokouji or Hirata.”

“Stop trying to make yourself look cool. You didn’t even target Ayanokouji or Hirata until well after that, did you?” demanded Ibuki.

Well, this was a strange situation. I’d admitted to being X, but Class C was divided on whether they believed me.

“It’s precisely because I was the most suspicious that I did things that way. Or perhaps it was because I had no other method available to me other than using Horikita?” I told them.

“But—!”

I decided to throw out a vague yet helpful statement to stir them up. “I’m the person you’ve been searching for.”

“Hah! Isn’t that suspicious?” Ibuki added. “Would X really just come right out and say that?”

An understandable response. It made sense they wouldn’t jump to believe me, considering that I had been keeping my identity hidden until now.

“I think this is fishy, too. He might’ve been told to step forward and claim he’s the mastermind as part of a ploy,” said Ishizaki.

“You predicted that X wouldn’t show up, right?” continued Ibuki, joining Ishizaki in urging Ryuuen to question the certainty he exhibited moments ago.

“Yes, I certainly did,” replied Ryuuen. “This looks like a bad move on your part, Ayanokouji. Your best option would’ve been to abandon Karuizawa Kei, not walk into an obvious trap. I suppose I understand

why Ibuki and Ishizaki don't believe you. If you're really X, tell me how you plan on getting out of this dilemma."

"*Am* I in a dilemma?" I asked.

Ryuuen and his lackeys looked completely unamused by my foolish question.

"I only came here because Karuizawa asked for help. If you want proof that I'm X, you could just wait until the next exam and see what I do," I added.

"That's not true. We know your identity. We also know Karuizawa's secret. Awful things will happen tomorrow if you leave here without doing as we say," replied Ryuuen.

"Awful things?"

"Enough already. Stop playing dumb and show me what you'll do."

"What I'll do? There's nothing I *can* do."

"I bet Sudou and those other guys are waiting nearby," said Ishizaki, glancing at the half-open door.

"Nope," Ryuuen said flatly.

"I-Is that so?" Ishizaki asked.

"If her classmates knew about Karuizawa's miserable past, her social life would be dead without me having to say a word. Try and use your head a little."

"I-I see."

"Still, I gotta say, you must think you're a real big deal if you're still trying to play dumb."

"That's enough, Ryuuen. There's absolutely no way X would just stroll up here alone," said Ibuki.

"Man, oh man. Now this is a problem. Ibuki and Ishizaki don't seem to believe that you're X," said Ryuuen.

He shrugged, appearing exasperated, as he looked over at Ibuki and Ishizaki.

"You say there's nothing you can do, Ayanokouji? But I need to ascertain the truth of the matter here. For that to happen, I think you need to let these two know what's going on and make everything clear.

Is that all right with you?" he asked, looking over at me with a broad smile on his face.

"I've already admitted to it. But if you won't believe me, then allow me to explain, Ibuki," I said, turning my gaze on the person who wouldn't stop doubting me. "The island exam. You were instructed to take pictures of our leader's keycard, but your digital camera got damaged somehow. Am I wrong?"

"H-how did you know that?!"

"It was me. I used water to short-circuit the camera without causing visible damage. When I met you in the forest, Ibuki, your fingers were covered in dirt. There were signs that you were digging nearby. When I returned to the spot later that night, I found a wireless transceiver. That was so you could communicate with Ryuuen, right?"

Even within Class C, not many people could have known they had a digital camera. The only people who could have seen Ibuki's hands covered in dirt at the time were me, Yamauchi, and Airi. In other words, this was definitive proof of my claims.

"You have to admit it now, Ibuki," said Ryuuen. "Ayanokouji is X."

"Wait—wait a second. Yeah, he might be really clever, but that isn't enough to say for sure that he's X, right?"

"Seriously, is there any reason to debate this further?" Ryuuen looked even more exasperated than before.

"It just doesn't make sense! If Ayanokouji really is X, the mastermind, why would he just show up here?! He wrecked all your plans so far, didn't he?!"

"He probably has a trick up his sleeve. A miracle beyond our imagination. If he doesn't, then…well, he's an idiot."

"Trick?" I said. "There's no trick I can pull in a situation like this. You already know Karuizawa's big secret. I understand what'll happen if I get careless here. You took plenty of precautions to corner me. Right?"

"Exactly. So, what're you gonna do about it? I can reveal your identity whenever I want. *And* I still have the threat of exposing Karuizawa's past to use against you. You're powerless."

"Indeed. I can't exactly report what you just did to Karuizawa to the school, either," I said.

Instances of violence between students during exams were punished by expulsion, but the same wasn't necessarily true of spats that occurred at other times. Even if I could give the school real proof of what they'd done, it was unlikely I'd be able to deal Ryuuen and Class C any real damage.

"And if you try to tell the school what we did up here, we'll leave Karuizawa high and dry in retaliation," said Ryuuen.

So, we'd both go down in flames if I tried anything, and Class D would probably be the one going down hardest. Ryuuen had switched from using his knowledge of Karuizawa's past to attack her, to using it to defend against me.

"No matter how you slice it, I win," he said.

"Okay. Well, are you satisfied? If so, I'll be taking Karuizawa back with me," I said.

"Come now, don't be so anticlimactic. You came all the way here. We might as well take our time." Ryuuen grabbed Karuizawa's arm and yanked her up.

"Ack!" she squealed.

"You wouldn't expose your identity without a reason. What're you planning?" Ryuuen extended his hand to me, as if challenging me.

"Sorry, Ryuuen. I can't fulfil your expectations."

"Huh?"

"I was just dancing in the palm of your hand. That's all."

No one present could've imagined that X would say something like that. They'd anticipated either a cruel man who would abandon Karuizawa to protect his identity, or a clever student who would swoop in and save her while keeping his identity secret.

For the first time since I stepped onto the rooftop, Ryuuen's smile began to fade.

"All this time spent hyping up the mysterious 'X,' and he's nothing but talk. What a disappointment. Maybe the digital-camera thing was just dumb luck," said Ibuki.

Even though they were allies, Ibuki had always distrusted Ryuuen, which was precisely why she dared question him so openly. Seeing an opportunity, I made my next move.

“I may have revealed myself to you, but that doesn’t mean I’m in trouble. Only Horikita and Karuizawa from Class D know who I am, so if this information makes its way to other classes, I’ll know one of you leaked it.”

“So what?” Ibuki demanded.

“If you spread word of my actions, I’ll report everything that happened here to the school,” I said.

“We just established that we have you cornered because you can’t do that.”

“I can. All I have to do is sacrifice Karuizawa.”

“Huh?”

“You assumed from the start that I’d abandon Karuizawa. But when I showed up here, you started talking as though you thought I wasn’t going to. Am I wrong?” I asked.

“Now, hold on, that doesn’t make sense,” said Ryuuen. “You could’ve kept yourself hidden if you sacrificed her to start with. You came all the way here precisely *because* you couldn’t sacrifice her. Don’t try to trick me.”

“Fine. If they already know about you, Kiyotaka, they can go ahead and tell everyone they like about my past,” said Karuizawa, looking over at me as she slowly picked herself off the floor.

I kept my eyes fixed on Ryuuen. “You heard her. Believe what you like, but if you spill the beans about me to the other classes, it’ll be war,” I said.

“Um…” stuttered Ishizaki. “Well, we know X’s identity now. Maybe that’s enough?”

“I agree. Ayanokouji might actually sacrifice her,” Ibuki said. Clearly, neither of them wanted to pursue things any further. They’d smoked X out, and were content with that.

“Heh heh heh!” Ryuuen suddenly clutched his head and laughed. “Well, you’ve got that right. If either side spills the beans, it’ll be open war.”

Both classes would be wounded in the ensuing conflict, whether those wounds were shallow or deep. Further, there was no guarantee Karuizawa would be destroyed by it. The image of a girl who held her

head high despite being bullied was a compelling one.

If Ryuuen declared this to be the end, we'd be done. But he'd never choose that option.

"Man, this is anticlimactic. Not only did you give up your identity so easily, but you have no choice but to leave the decision up to me, your opponent! Even then, there's no doubt in my mind that Ayanokouji is X, the one who's been keeping me entertained. Which means I'd be missing out if I don't have you entertain me to the very end. Isn't that right, Ishizaki?"

"Y-yes."

"See, everything is a game to me. Not just getting to Class A, but crushing Ichinose; crushing Suzune; crushing classes D and B; even finally crushing Sakayanagi, whom I've been saving as a special treat for last… It's all just my way of staving off boredom."

Still chuckling, Ryuuen grabbed Karuizawa's hair. Her face twisted in agony, but there was no fear in her eyes.

"Heh. You were so full of despair moments ago, but now your eyes tell me that you have absolute faith in Ayanokouji. I bet you'd tell everyone about your past yourself if it'd protect him, wouldn't you? Relax. Your role here has ended," said Ryuuen.

Seeming to lose interest in Karuizawa, he let go of her hair and shoved her away.

"You really have entertained me, Ayanokouji. You might be just another Class D defect, but you saw through my plans time and time again. Even more than that, you think like me. How could I help but want to draw you out of hiding? I didn't think about what would come next. I thought I'd choose that once I met you." His tone was almost pleasant. "Now I've decided."

"…What are you planning to do, Ayanokouji?" asked Ibuki.

"Why do you sound so irritated, Ibuki?"

Ibuki drew level with Ryuuen, and looked him right in the eyes, without fear. "What you're about to do puts Class C at risk," she said.

"Heh. You, the eternal lone wolf who never tried to cooperate with her classmates, talking about risk to Class C? Don't make me laugh," said Ryuuen.

“I cooperated with you because I thought you were acting for the class’s sake. But this is a step too far. Ayanokouji clearly has nothing up his sleeve.” Ibuki sounded as if she was releasing months of pent-up anger and frustration. “Iwon’t be a part of what you’re about to do.”

“You think you know what I’m going to do?” asked Ryuuen.

“Yes, because I’ve watched you since April. You’re going to hurt him, aren’t you?”

As Ibuki said those words, Ishizaki’s body went rigid.

“Ishizaki. Komiya. Kondou. Even Albert. You beat every single one of them until they were ready to obey you at all times,” Ibuki continued.

“Violence best demonstrates the power difference between us.”

“Isn’t that difference already plain to see?”

“Ayanokouji has been a thorn in our side. We have to return the favor.”

“I’m telling you, that kind of thinking is going to endanger our class!” Ibuki cried.

Smack! Ryuuen struck her across the face, and she fell silent immediately.

“As long as I’m having fun, I don’t care,” he said. “Violence is easy to understand.”

As illustrated by what he’d just done. So, that was his answer, huh? I supposed the outcome was inevitable once we passed the point where we could continue to delude ourselves.

“Listen, what matters right now is what each side will do with the information they’ve gained. Ayanokouji wants to wrap things up here without anyone else finding out what happened, including his identity and Karuizawa’s past. It’s also true that we blackmailed Karuizawa and dumped freezing water on her. If that gets out, we’ll be punished. To put it simply, as long as both sides keep what happened here secret, no one needs to know.”

A logical conclusion, considering what had happened so far.

“No matter what happens, both sides have no choice but to grit our teeth and accept it.”

And yet, not everyone C Class thought so.

“I think I understand why you revealed your identity so late in the game,” Ryuuen told me. “It’s so we can’t take this fight somewhere else. Shut the door, Albert.”

Albert closed the door that led from the stairwell to the roof.

“But, in the end, it was still a bad move,” continued Ryuuen. “You might’ve thought that fight would end here, but I’m not letting things go.”

Everyone present could feel in their bones what was about to happen. Ryuuen wasn’t about to change his methods.

“My escape route’s gone, huh? Well, I guess you got what you wanted,” I told him.

“First, I’m going to wipe that calm look off your face and replace it with fear. You’re underestimating me, aren’t you? You think I won’t do it.”

“Are you really going to resort to violence?”

“War isn’t just a battle of wits, you know. You can win just as well by assassinating an army’s leader as by outsmarting its tactician. Violence is the most powerful force in the world. It doesn’t matter how crafty you are—violence will bring you to heel.”

Even now, with a brawl moments from breaking out, I momentarily glanced over at Ryuuen, Ibuki, Ishizaki, and then Albert.

“I’m going to burn the image of your gangly, beaten body into my eyes. Then, starting next semester, I’ll take a bite out of Ichinose,” said Ryuuen.

“Violence is a powerful tool. I can’t argue with that. However, you have to be stronger than your opponent for that to work to your advantage. Understand?” I asked.

“Huh?”

“The four of you won’t be enough to stop me.”

“Wha…?” Ibuki raised an incredulous eyebrow.

“Heh heh heh. Ha ha ha ha ha!” Ryuuen clutched his sides in raucous laughter. “Oh? I think Ayanokouji’s saying he’s not to yield to violence from the likes of us. Then show me what you’ve got. Ishizaki.”

“A-are you sure?” Ishizaki hesitated. It would’ve been one thing if his opponent were someone like Sudou, who was known for getting into

fights, but I was a regular student. His resistance was understandable.

"Don't hold back. Take him out."

"But—"

"If we give Ayanokouji a thorough beating, there won't be anything more to worry about."

"Wait!" cried Karuizawa as Ishizaki approached me. "Why are you doing something so stupid?! You have nothing to gain by beating up Kiyotaka!"

"Hey, hey. Stay out of this, Karuizawa. You served your purpose here. Thanks to Ayanokouji's sacrifice, your secret is safe. Show some gratitude." Ryuuen grabbed Karuizawa's hair once again.

"Guh!"

He shoved her away. "Stay out of it."

Even so, Karuizawa bared her teeth at Ryuuen for my sake. She got back up and tried to leap at him.

"Don't worry, Karuizawa," I said, stopping her in her tracks.

"B-but—"

"There's nothing to be anxious about."

"That's right. *You're* the one who oughta worry," Ishizaki told me, stepping forward. "I'm not a bad guy, Ayanokouji. I'm just following Ryuuen-san's orders."

"I don't really care," I told him.

This was all going according to plan.

Ishizaki casually threw a punch at me—no, it was more like the swat you might give a naughty child. A slow, monotonous motion that even a junior high or elementary school student could have avoided. His right fist came at me in a wide arc, and I caught it with my hand.

"Huh…?"

"If you're going to do this, you better take it seriously," I warned him.

He didn't seem to take the hint, even though I'd completely blocked his blow, perhaps because it had been such a lazy blow to start. So, I squeezed his fist. My right hand still clamped down on his, I applied more and more pressure.

“Huh? Ah…ugh…huh?!” Ishizaki’s face went taut, and his knees trembled.

“What’s the matter, Ishizaki?” asked Ibuki, sensing something was wrong.

“Ah…ngh…ah! T-time out… Stop!” Ishizaki buckled at the knees and fell. Unable to take it any longer, he grabbed my arm and tried to free himself, but it was futile.

Albert was the first to grasp the reality of the situation. He didn’t wait for Ryuuen’s order, but swung at me with his thick arm, which was the width of an electrical pole. He attacked from my left even though I was free on that side, probably anticipating that I would take a defensive stance after Ishizaki freed himself. He was wrong. I could’ve dodged the attack, but instead, I steeled myself and caught Albert’s punch with my left hand, prepared to take a little damage.

SMACK! An almost-electric jolt traveled from my elbow all the way to my shoulder.

“Just as I thought. That hurts,” I mumbled.

It was difficult to read Albert’s expression behind his sunglasses, but he was probably catching on.

“No way. Y-you’re not messing around, are you? Albert? Ishizaki?” Ibuki asked incredulously.

Maybe she couldn’t tell Albert really had swung at me with all his might, or that Ishizaki was in pain. Or maybe she just didn’t want to believe her eyes. I released Ishizaki, who crouched and clutched his arm.

“Do it, Albert,” Ryuuen ordered.

Albert charged at me, his powerful fists swinging. I’d intentionally let him land the first blow, but I couldn’t take too many more hits of that caliber, so I dodged under his swing and went in for a frontal attack, punching him in the gut. I didn’t hold back, either. It wouldn’t be wise to underestimate an opponent whose abilities were still largely unknown to me.

Based on the slight change in Albert’s flat expression, and how hard his body had felt against my fist, I judged that I’d dealt minimal damage. He’d clearly trained his body well—but it still had all the weaknesses human bodies did. All this meant was that I would have to

work a bit harder to crush him. The human body had numerous weaknesses—the solar plexus, for instance, was a part you couldn't strengthen through training. At best, you could accustom yourself to pain so it was easier to endure.

He must've realized that I was going for his solar plexus with my next strike, because he twisted away to evade it. However, I'd been feinting in anticipation of just that, and quickly jabbed his throat with my palm like a sword.

"Ghh!" Albert gurgled in pain.

"Ayanokouji!" shouted Ishizaki, charging at me.

"If you're going to come at me, don't shout," I said exasperatedly.

At least he'd saved me some trouble. I kicked Ishizaki's left knee, sending him to the ground. He was so easy to read. Albert had also fallen to his knees, so I spun and delivered a kick to his face, using my momentum to punch Ishizaki in the jaw on the return. He collapsed, and all was silent on the rooftop.

Ryuuen, Ibuki, and Karuizawa stared, burning that unbelievable spectacle into their eyes.

"Well, I guess we underestimated him. He acted so tough because he was confident in his skills, huh? I didn't expect this," said Ryuuen.

"S-so, you're saying that Ayanokouji turned the tables on you?" Ibuki stammered.

"Are you serious, Ibuki?" I asked.

"Huh?"

"Ryuuen's always been the sort to use violence. Do you think I'd voluntarily allow him to engineer a situation where he could rampage without repercussion?"

"Hmm?" Ibuki tilted her head in confusion.

Ryuuen seemed to have doubts as well. "Wait a minute, Ayanokouji. Now even *I'm* not following. *I* set up this meeting."

"You still don't get it, do you?" I sighed deeply. "Our confrontation here was determined long in advance. I knew that, when faced with a stalemate, Ryuuen Kakeru would resort to violence to settle things."

Ryuuen thought that everything that had happened so far was his

doing. He couldn't have been more wrong.

"If I never intended to reveal my identity, I wouldn't have used Manabe during the sports festival. I knew you'd identify her as the obvious culprit once you heard that recording. That is what led you here, right? I anticipated that you'd question them, and learn that I was blackmailing them for bullying Karuizawa," I explained.

Ryuuen couldn't deny a single thing I'd said so far, naturally.

"You were convinced that a link existed between Karuizawa and me. You had Ishizaki, Komiya, and the others tail Class D students, and moved openly against Kouenji yourself, thinking that it would put pressure on X. I imagine you genuinely enjoyed yourself, but you actually gave me some time to think."

"Heh. My, now you're saying some pretty interesting stuff. So, you purposefully made it look like I had you in the palm of my hand?"

"To be more precise, you were dancing in mine," I replied.

"Allow me to apologize, Ayanokouji. You really *are* clever. The advantage I thought I had is gone, and now I'm in trouble. What should we do, Ibuki?" Ryuuen smiled happily.

"Seriously, what's the deal with you two?!" Ibuki seethed.

Something seemed to snap within her, leaving her frustration free to spill forth. She launched a kick at me, apparently unconcerned that I could see her underwear. Well, it was probably more than it hadn't even occurred to her in her fury. I took a step back and calmly evaded her kick.

It was like a switch had been flipped inside of her. Ibuki took a couple steps toward me, closing the distance between us, then kicked again, leaving me little room to dodge. She was good. Even if Horikita had been in the pink of health during their fight on the island, Ibuki would've beaten her.

And yet, I evaded all her kicks. Ibuki stopped attacking and clicked her tongue in apparent frustration. "Seriously, what are you…?"

"You really don't know?" I replied.

"You honestly make me mad. I'm not sure why, but you piss me off!"

She leapt at me once more. This time, rather than dodge, I

immediately closed the distance between us.

"…?!"

I wasn't averse to playing with Ibuki, but I didn't want to drag this out much further, either. I grabbed her by the neck and slammed her to the ground, giving her no chance to dodge or guard. Her eyes went wide, and she stopped moving entirely. Slamming her head would've been even more effective, but this wasn't a fight to the death.

"Violence isn't a tool only you and your goons possess," I said to Ryuuen.

Ibuki, Ishizaki, and Albert—all of Ryuuen's right-hand men—lay collapsed on the ground. Karuizawa was unable to utter a word.

"I'm impressed you're still keeping your cool after seeing that play out," I added.

"You're not just clever, but also capable of dishing out violence when called upon. I underestimated you." Ryuuen clapped in genuine respect as he walked up to me. "Do you know what I'd like to say now, Ayanokouji?"

"Nope."

He sounded calm, as if he didn't register the weight of his predicament at all. It probably wasn't a bluff. This was something characteristic of Ryuuen; something he excelled at. It was what had enabled him to move so confidently for so long.

"Physical strength alone doesn't determine victory or defeat. You gotta be tough on the inside, too!" said Ryuuen.

He adjusted his stance so that he was lower to the ground, then thrust his left fist toward me, aiming not for my face but my abdomen. I leapt backward to evade, and he followed in hot pursuit, jabbing with his right arm.

"Sorry, but I won't let you hit me," I told him.

I evaded him once more, then grabbed his hair with my left hand. He reacted instantly, pushing my arm away. The moment I had his attention focused on my arm—I kicked him hard in the side.

"Gah!" Ryuuen immediately put some distance between us to avoid my follow-up attacks.

"Not bad, Ryuuen." He far surpassed Ishizaki in overall strength. I

was honestly impressed. He'd taken a serious hit, but showed no sign of being about to collapse. I still had trouble picturing him being a match for Albert, though.

"This is so much fun!" Ryuuen laughed louder than before. "Turning the tables even after being brought to the pits of despair! This isn't enough for me. I need more, Ayanokouji."

He charged at me once more, holding nothing back. His movements weren't those of a trained martial artist, but clearly self-taught, a style shaped by countless brawls. I couldn't dodge all his attacks forever.

"Why don't you show off your fighting skills more often?" Ryuuen demanded.

"I have my reasons."

"That so? After I beat you, how about you tell me them?"

"Do you think you're going to win?"

"Do you think you can't lose?"

"Can't really imagine it, sorry."

"Sure, you might win this time. But what about tomorrow? The day after?"

"So, you're saying if we keep doing this over and over, you'll win eventually?" I asked.

"What about when you're in the middle of pissing? When you're taking a shit? I'll come after you when you least expect it," Ryuuen said.

"Aren't you afraid of losing?"

"I don't get afraid. Never felt fear once in my life."

"No fear, huh?" Now that was interesting. This was probably the source of his confidence.

"You'll understand once you know pain," Ryuuen said. "Pain gives way to fear for ordinary people."

"Teach me about pain, then."

"With pleasure!" Ryuuen grabbed my shoulders and kneed me in the stomach.

"Kiyotaka!" Karuizawa screamed. But I'd taken the attack head-on on purpose. Nothing to worry about.

“Just a few more hits and you’ll get it!”

Ryuuen moved forward to kick me, aiming for the same spot he’d just hit. He closed the distance between us, and I guarded my face with my left hand. He lashed out with his right arm, and when he pulled it back, struck me again with his right knee. It was his strongest blow yet. I staggered back, feeling pain shoot through my entire body.

“How about it? You get it now?”

“Unfortunately, I don’t ‘get’ anything,” I said. “This is just pain.”

“Are you trying to say you’re the same as me? That you don’t feel fear?”

“That’s not it, Ryuuen. That’s not what I’m saying.”

I knew all about fear born through pain. I knew the terror and misery of being a loser. I’d seen people destroyed by it before my eyes, time and time again. But eventually, I stopped feeling fear. Instead, I just felt cold, because I’d come to realize that no matter how much suffering or despair others experienced, the same would never happen to me.

If you have the means to protect yourself, that’s all you need. If you can keep yourself safe from all harm, you win.

“Then let’s play some more!” Ryuuen showered me with blows, concentrating attacks on my abdomen. I lowered my hips, intercepting his kick. “Tch! Saw through that, huh?”

I would deal with this by dodging his attacks and keeping my cool. I absolutely would not take any critical injuries.

“What’s the matter? Aren’t you gonna play, Ayanokouji? Why didn’t you dodge those easy blows at first, huh?”

“I was testing a hypothesis. I wanted to see whether I could feel that fear you talked about,” I replied.

“You’ve got some nerve with that condescension, you freak!”

He’d sensed the gulf in power between us, but he was unfazed. Usually, the more confident a fighter was in their skill, the deeper the despair that overcame them when they discovered themselves outmatched. But I didn’t get that feeling from Ryuuen. He wasn’t in a reckless rage that blinded him to the truth, either.

I’d let him think he held all the cards, then flipped the table in an

attempt to break his spirit, but I'd underestimated his resilience. That was a miscalculation on my part. Of course, misreading his upper limits was a trivial error. It just meant this would take longer than anticipated. Ryuuen would just have to suffer that much more pain.

"Where'd you get this kind of strength? This isn't normal, Ayanokouji."

True enough. You didn't get skills like mine just through brawling. I said nothing, but closed the distance to Ryuuen, who was clearly waiting to strike back, his sharp gaze fixed on me.

"You've got all this power, but you keep it hidden?" he asked. "Do you get off on looking down on mere mortals? Does that turn you on? Make you feel good?"

"I've never looked down on anyone. Whether other people succeed or fail has nothing to do with me."

Ryuuen didn't seem to like that answer. He pushed his hair back and laughed, as if rejecting the very notion that a person could be that apathetic. "Impossible. Humans are made of greed."

Of course I experienced greed, among many other things. But that was beside the point. Indulging Ryuuen's games wasn't going to change his mind. I readied my stance again, getting in position.

"All right, then. I'll just keep pounding you until you *do* feel fear!" he barked.

That's enough, Ryuuen.

As he shifted, preparing to drive his knee into my head, I grabbed his left arm and forcefully pulled him in close. Then I delivered a vicious right hook directly to his face.

"Gah!" he cried.

The blow would have rendered another person unconscious, but Ryuuen just went flying backward. I had no intention of knocking him out with a single blow, anyway. He hit the concrete and I was on top of him in a moment, raining punches on his unprotected torso.

"You said you've never felt fear, didn't you, Ryuuen?" I asked.

"Ah…ah…heh, that's right. I don't know fear. I've never known it."

His face bruised, his eyes nearly swollen shut, Ryuuen still fought

back. But his strength was all but gone, and it was all he could do to swing weakly at the air. I responded with a powerful but precise blow to his solar plexus, and his expression turned rigid.

"Ugh…ugh! I'm a confident fighter, but it's not like I've never lost before. No, it's precisely *because* I've been beaten more times than other people that—gah!"

I punched him again and again, alternating left and right fists in quick succession. Blood trickled from Ryuuen's mouth.

"Gah! …Ah, damn it, it's getting hard to talk again."
And yet, he showed no signs of fear.

"Violence shows you who people really are. The ones doing the beating, and the ones being beaten." He closed his eyes and chuckled weakly. It was like he was provoking me, daring me to hit him as much as I wanted. "Ah, ahh…heh. Ha…this is probably fun, huh, Ayanokouji? You can afford to be cocky, with strength like that. You're free. You can do whatever you want. Show me, Ayanokouji…"

He opened his eyes. I hit him again, aiming for his already-swollen face. He was bleeding freely now, both internally and externally, and yet, I saw no fear in him. What should've been an intrinsic emotion was nowhere to be seen.

"Isn't this enough, Ryuuen?" I proposed. But he wouldn't accept that, of course.

"Heh. What's the matter, Ayanokouji? I haven't given up yet. Come on, choke the life out of me."

He was goading me. All but handing his life to me on a silver platter. I took another swing, and his face contorted into an expression of pain for an instant.

"Ow…that hurts. But that's all…just pain."

His eyes hadn't changed. He believed in losing the battle but winning the war. He had no doubts.

"Even if you win today, I'll keep coming at you, no matter how times it takes," he taunted. "No matter where you are at school, I'll find an opening and attack. And eventually, I'll win."

He'd probably survived this long by making those sorts of comebacks. Even the strongest opponent wasn't invincible. Ryuuen's self-confidence seemed to be rooted in his ability to strike back at his

opponents and find openings to hit them where it hurt. He used violence to fill their hearts with fear.

The fear that, once you'd made him your enemy, you'd never know when he'd attack again or how badly he might hurt you.

"Go ahead. Enjoy this temporary delight. Your victory's right in front of you, Ayanokouji," he taunted. "This feels good, doesn't it? It feels good to face off against a weaker opponent, doesn't it? And lurking underneath that pleasure is…fear!"

Fear? Lurking underneath?

"Do you want to win? Do you want to lose? What are you feeling, Ayanokouji?"

Do I want to win?

Do I want to lose?

"Are you laughing at me now that you're on top? Are you angry? Excited, overjoyed? Maybe frustrated? Tell me!"

I had no idea what he was talking about. I couldn't see my own face or read my own expression, but I was certain of one thing. Something this insignificant would never shake me. I felt no emotions, and definitely not fear.

I hit Ryuuen in the face again. I'd lost count of how many times I'd struck him at this point, but I kept going, punching him over and over as his face twisted in pain. *Yes, that's it, Ryuuen. Now you see, don't you?*

He had to see, now, that the feeling known as fear certainly existed within him.

I landed one last blow, more powerful than any before, and Ryuuen finally lost consciousness. He wanted to toy with my emotions. Unfortunately for him, there was nothing there. I had no heart for him to manipulate.

I slowly got off his limp body and stood. I couldn't afford to leave Karuizawa out in the cold any longer.

"Sorry. I put you in a really difficult situation. Are you hurt?" I asked her.

"I'm…fine. I'm just cold. I've kind of lost feeling in some places…"

I extended my hand toward Karuizawa, who'd sat there the whole time, watching the scene from beginning to end. When she took it, her fingers felt like ice.

"Are you disillusioned with me now?" I asked.

"Of course I am. You betrayed me from the very beginning."

"Yeah, I suppose you're right. So why didn't you sell me out to Ryuuen?"

"For my own sake. That's all there is to it," she replied before collapsing into my arms, trembling. "I was scared. I was so scared!"

"Don't think about it anymore. What happened today, what's happened so far. You can think about that stuff later. The only thing that's for certain right now, in this moment, is that your curse has been lifted. Manabe…no, *no one* will dig up your past again. As for what's to come, well, you can just keep going the way you always have," I told her.

Karuizawa was depending on me to hold her body upright, perhaps because she lacked the strength to support herself right now. If I looked at things from her perspective, these had been a disastrous few months. She'd been bullied by Manabe and her friend through a stroke of bad luck, then been intentionally targeted for bullying as well. Finally, Ryuuen had dug up the scars of her past, and she'd realized it was all because of me.

Her spirit had to be shattered. She must be emotionally unstable, exhausted.

"You've managed to overcome your past and create an identity as the person you are now," I told her. "Starting tomorrow, you can just pick up where you left off."

This was Karuizawa Kei we were talking. She could do it. I'd been sure of that from the moment I met her on the rooftop.

"I hurt you. I won't ask you to forgive me. But please remember

just one thing. If something like what happened today happens again, I will come save you."

"Kiyo…taka…"

Despite everything she'd been through, Karuizawa couldn't bring herself to stop clinging to me like a parasite. She'd reached a point where she couldn't survive at this school without me around. No matter what happened, as long as I was here, she would endure.

I wondered what would have happened if I'd showed up to save her earlier. I felt quite certain that if I'd fulfilled my promise more speedily, her dependency on me would only have grown stronger. Conversely, if I had never showed up at all, abandoning her to being bullied once more like she had in the past, it would have intensified her despair.

By delaying my arrival and still ultimately showing up, though, I'd strengthened her belief that she could hold onto her faith in me till that last possible moment. At the same time, it had allowed me to ascertain that she wouldn't easily betray me.

Of course, if she *had* given Ryuuen my name, she would feel guilty, and I could manipulate that guilt in my favor. After getting my hands on a pawn like Karuizawa, letting her go would be a waste. How necessary she was to my plans was secondary; what mattered most was ensuring she stayed under my control.

"A few steps below us, the student council president—well, the former student council president—and Chabashira-sensei are waiting. They know the circumstances to a certain degree, so they should be able to handle things, including taking care of your soaked uniform," I told Karuizawa.

"O-okay. What about you, Kiyotaka?"

"I've still got a few things to tidy up here. Besides, we don't want to be seen together. It's best if you go first."

I lightly pushed her back. Karuizawa left the roof, heading back down the stairs, and I assessed my next move.

"All right then…" I muttered.

I couldn't just leave the four unconscious people spread across the rooftop where they were. Chabashira-sensei aside, it'd be bad if another teacher found them. Starting with Ishizaki, I gently slapped their cheeks

to wake them up, saving Ryuuen for last.

"Tch…"

"Awake, huh?"

"Do you think this…is over, Ayanokouji?"

"It's over," I said. No matter how you looked at it, this fight had been decided. "Surely you're not about to say you want to keep going?"

"I'll use any means necessary…to win," said Ryuuen, slowly sitting up. "Even if it means…all-out war."

"Are you going to report me to the school?"

"Heh. That would be really, really lame…but it *is* an option. What if I made it look like you set a trap for us?" he asked.

"Let me give you some advice. I don't recommend it. The former student council president is waiting on the stairs as we speak. He may not know all the details of what happened here, but it's obvious you were the one setting a trap, Ryuuen…especially since you were caught on video spray-painting the surveillance camera. I, on the other hand, was at Keyaki Mall when you did that. I can produce many alibis as I need to prove it."

It was smart to have as much insurance as possible, after all.

"So, you could've had a third-party witness everything…but you didn't?" Ryuuen demanded.

"Yes. I knew you wouldn't stop attacking me until I struck you at least once."

"You seriously think I'm just gonna lay down and accept defeat?"

"Yeah, I do. There's a reason I defeated you, Ryuuen. You made a mistake choosing the order of your foes. If you'd cut your teeth fighting Ichinose, and then Katsuragi and Sakayanagi, you might've been closer to my level by the time you chose to challenge me. But your curiosity got the better of you. You overplayed your hand." I didn't sugarcoat my words.

Ryuuen wore a bitter smile. "You sure are direct."

"I'd like to say I'd be happy to have a rematch, but I'm done drawing attention from here on out. Target someone else," I told him.

I'd expected him to lash back at that, but instead, Ryuuen silently

contemplated what I'd said.

"Since you deliberately had a witness keep his distance, that means you're keeping that card in play to use against us in the future if you have to," he said. "Even if it means admitting your identity and Karuizawa's past."

"I'd like to avoid that, but yes."

"And I wouldn't be the only one going down if that happened. So would Ishizaki, Ibuki, and Albert, huh?"

Probably so. I wasn't sure exactly what would happen to them, but it was safe to say it would involve a suitably harsh punishment.

"Your overconfidence in relying on my identity and Karuizawa's past was your undoing. If you'd been less reckless, you would've either mounted a larger-scale attack or posted more lookouts," I told him.

"In other words, Class C's in trouble as long as I'm in charge, huh?" he asked.

"Not necessarily. As long as you make no further attempts to attack us, I won't use this incident to advance myself."

"I'm not naïve enough to take you at your word on that. If Class C ever corners you again, you'll report what happened today to the school. Am I right?"

"Maybe," I said. It was certainly true that I couldn't promise him that. Who knew if Class C was even capable of functioning normally if they were forced to keep their heads down? "But what are you going to do? You can't undo what happened, Ryuuen."

"Shut up. My fight with you is finished. My own battle's over, too."

Ryuuen looked at Ibuki and the others, then took out his phone and typed something. He slid the phone across the roof, where it stopped by Ibuki's feet.

"What?" Ibuki, who had been listening quietly to our conversation, glared at both of us.

"I take responsibility for everything," said Ryuuen. "Before I do, I'm transferring all my points to you."

"Huh? Ryuuen, what are you saying? Are you nuts?" Ibuki cried.

"Y-yeah, Ryuuen-san! It's not like anyone's gonna blab about

this," Ishizaki babbled. "You don't have to take responsibility!"

Neither side could talk publicly about what'd happened here today, but Class D held an overwhelmingly advantageous position. Ryuuen realized that. There was only one way to cut his losses.

"Ayanokouji, I'm the sole perpetrator of this incident. My expulsion should be enough, don't you think?"

"Oh? That sounds serious. Taking responsibility and all."

"Don't be dumb," snapped Ryuuen, wiping some more blood from his mouth. "A tyrant can only reign as long as his power holds meaning. If I've lost after coming this far, no one's gonna follow me anymore."

Class C had permitted his tyrannical behavior so far because he produced results. Ryuuen's methods were aggressive and heavy-handed, but once beaten, he realized that he was no longer qualified to rule. I had to give him credit for that.

It would seem I'd made the right decision by choosing to set this stage and let him go on a rampage.

"Stop screwing around! Why would you entrust your points to me?!" demanded Ibuki.

"Because you hate me. Divide the remaining points among everyone. Once the school expels me, I bet Katsuragi and Sakayanagi will void our contract, but there's nothing to be done about that," replied Ryuuen. If the person named in the contract dropped out of school, that was probably exactly what would happen, too.

"Ryuuen-san, are you serious?!" exclaimed Ishizaki sorrowfully.

"Shut it. No need to shout, I can hear you just fine." Ryuuen chuckled. "I'll leave the rest to you. Later."

It seemed his mind was made up. He stood, and approached the stairs, deaf to both Ibuki and Ishizaki's final words to him.

"Are you sure? I think you'll come to regret this," I said, stopping him in his tracks.

"Why do you care?" he shot back.

"If you leave without knowing why you lost, you won't grow," I told him.

"Huh?"

“Are you really fine with not knowing why you lost to me?”

“Let it go. There’s no point trying to save me. You’ve got nothing to gain by sparing me now that I know about you and Karuizawa. I could expose you at any time.”

“True enough. If I must name a reason for sparing you…it’ll work to Class D’s advantage to have you crush Sakayanagi and Ichinose for us. Besides, if your contract with Katsuragi remains in place, Class A will continue to hemorrhage points. Most importantly, though, if you suddenly drop out of school, Sakayanagi and Ichinose will assume that X beat you. That spells trouble for me down the line,” I said to Ryuuen. “So, trust me, this is to my benefit. Even if word of what happened up here gets out, I took no noticeable injuries. It would just look like you guys fought among yourselves, wouldn’t it?”

Ryuuen ignored me.

“This is what happened here,” he told Ibuki, instead. “I tried to punish the four of you for your failings, but you turned the tables and beat me up instead, then forced me to withdraw. I’ll leave it at that.”

“Are…are you really okay with that?” she asked.

“Allow me to add just one thing,” I said. “You are free to drop out of school of your own volition and you’re free to doubt me. But I have absolutely no intention of telling anyone about today unless you force my hand. The former student council president has similarly promised to keep it to himself. Nothing about this situation is forcing you to withdraw—but if you do, I won’t stop you.”

“Then don’t stop me. I don’t trust you,” snapped Ryuuen.

With those words, he opened the door and vanished from sight. Ishizaki and Ibuki, left behind, looked like they didn’t agree with his actions in the slightest.

ADVANCED NURTURING HIGH SCHOOL

First-Year Class A Teacher Evaluation

Class Point Total as of 12/1:

874

UP UNTIL SUMMER VACATION

I think Class A truly got off to a strong start by electing two cooperative leaders. While they've maintained high standards, they've also proven to be modest, and not conceited in the slightest.

THE DESERTED ISLAND TEST

By partnering with Class C, Class A successfully cleared the test while maintaining a record-high amount of class points. The final results were disappointing, but still indicative of their potential.

THE CRUISE SHIP TEST

In the absence of Sakayanagi Arisu, a class representative, the Class A students poured everything they had into this test.

THE SPORTS FESTIVAL

The athletes of Class A took the field. No particular problems occurred when Class A temporarily allied themselves with Class D during the festival.

THE PAPER SHUFFLE

The Class A students studied diligently and the test proceeded without incident.

Chapter 7:
What Ryuuen Wins and Loses

THAT NIGHT, I dreamed about my childhood. About that time I killed a snake. If I'd grabbed it and taught it to feel fear before killing it, would I still have slaughtered it in the end?

"Freakin' stupid."

That line of thought was pointless. You only got one life, and it didn't have an undo button. Some days you won, and some days you lost. Yesterday just happened to be the latter. The number of times I'd been beaten was probably in the triple digits by now. Heck, yesterday hadn't even been the first time I'd lost to *Ayanokouji*.

So, what made this different from everything that'd happened so far?

At eight o'clock the next morning, I left the dorms and made my way to the school building. Although this was the first day of our winter vacation, club activities were still being held, so the building had been left open. School rules required uniforms be worn within the building, but I didn't need to pay attention to that particular rule anymore.

The clubs were already engaged in their morning practice, which generally started around seven. Since Keyaki Mall didn't open until ten, I was probably the only student heading toward the school building now.

"…Achoo!"

Along the way, I encountered a lone student standing by the side of the path, trembling from the cold. I ignored her and kept going, but she called out to me.

"You finally came."

I just kept walking.

"Hey, wait a minute!" she said, chasing me in a panic. She grabbed my shoulder.

"What are you doing? Don't just touch me like that," I growled.

“I don’t exactly *want* to touch you. You foisted your phone on me, remember? I’m just giving it back,” said a red-nosed Ibuki, thrusting the phone at me.

“You could’ve done this at a better time. How long have you been waiting?”

“Who knows?”

That probably meant she’d waited for quite a while. Why was she so sensitive when it came to pointless things like this? I didn’t take the phone, but Ibuki grabbed my arm when I tried to slip past.

“Are you really going to quit?” she asked.

“Didn’t you just say you only wanted to give my phone back?” I snapped.

Ibuki glared at me. “Do you remember what you said back when you fought Ishizaki and Albert? You said that the strongest person is whoever wins in the end, no matter how many times they lost before. That’s exactly how it went when you fought them.”

“So what?”

“Are you really going to end this after losing to Ayanokouji one time?”

“I misread the situation and sealed my fate. Besides, I couldn’t care less anymore,” I replied.

“What? That’s super lame.”

I didn’t care anymore. Guess that guy was a big deal after all, if he could make me feel this way.

“Maybe,” I said, responding to Ibuki with complete indifference.

“Don’t give me ‘maybe,’” Ibuki huffed. She hadn’t let go of my arm.

“You wanted me to quit school, didn’t you? Isn’t this perfect?” I asked.

“I cooperated with you because you said you’d get us to Class A. Now you’re just going to leave us in the lurch?”

Ibuki had her outbursts every so often, but it seemed like this had been building for a long time. She had more to get off her chest, apparently, because she showed no sign of stopping.

“I tolerated your tyranny. I put up with it because we had the same ultimate goal. Even when Class C got our points docked the other day, and you wouldn’t tell us why, no one complained. We all believed you’d get us to Class A someday. And now you’re just going to drop out? That’s lame. *So, lame.*”

She took a breath, and added one more thing. “Is there anything more pathetic?”

“You really gonna spin this however’s most convenient for you?” I asked.

I stopped walking. I had to move carefully, because my body hurt all over.

“Yeah, I told you good-for-nothings that if you followed me, I’d get you to Class A. That was just me dangling a carrot before your noses while I used violence to sow the seeds of fear. You *do* know about my contract with Class A, don’t you? That was all for me. Just me. I couldn’t give a shit about the rest of you.”

“You’re saying you planned to make it to A Class alone?”

“Yup. There’s really no way I’d try to take you lot with me. Don’t you agree?”

I was sure even Ibuki would be convinced by this much.

“Eight hundred million private points,” Ibuki said.

“Huh?”

“After you tossed your phone over to me yesterday, I agonized about whether I should transfer your points to my account. But then I decided to have a look at what else was on your phone.”

Ibuki turned the screen toward me. It showed the three-year-long strategy I’d been working on.

“If you were trying to make it to Class A alone, two million points would’ve been enough. So why come up with a strategy that includes this number? Eight hundred million is the number of points necessary to get all of Class C up to Class A, isn’t it? Though I can’t imagine how we’d ever save up that many points…”

“Quit dreaming. I was only messing around when I wrote that.” I snatched my phone back. “Hiyori and Kaneda will probably lead Class C from here on out. As long as Ayanokouji makes no move, it’s still

possible for you to rack up that many points."

"That's not what I'm talking about."

Ugh. Stupid Ibuki. She hadn't transferred any of my private points at all. What a pain. "What do you want me to say?"

"If you're going to drop out, then fight me," she replied.

What an absolutely crazy proposition. Idiots made good pawns, but the downside was that they ran wild every so often, like this.

"With the injuries you got yesterday, and how cold it is today, you probably can't move too well, hmm?" I mused out loud. I'd noticed already that her grip on my sleeve was weaker than usual.

I pulled my arm free and started forward—and she hit me. I went flying, landing hard on the pavement.

"Ow. God, I can't even take a fall," I groaned. That bastard Ayanokouji had done a number on me.

"Ah. That felt great. Well, if you're going to quit, hurry up and do it," snapped Ibuki, before turning to head back toward the dorms.

I wondered just how long she *had* been waiting for me.

7.1

UPON REACHING THE SCHOOL, I paid a visit to my homeroom teacher. I'd called ahead and made an appointment on the dorm's landline. I was doing this the very next day to forestall the complications of the whole mess on the roof as much as I could, especially considering I'd tampered with a security camera and the former student council president knew what had happened.

"I gotta talk to you about the thing I reported yesterday, Sakagami."

"I understand," said Sakagami. "Please accompany me to the counselor's office."

"Sure."

"But first, there's something we must address."

"What?"

"Would you step outside, please?" Sakagami called to someone in the faculty room.

"Ryuuen-san…"

Ishizaki and Albert emerged to join us in the hallway. First that idiot Ibuki, now them? Why were they here?

"They've been waiting since early this morning, wondering whether you'd come by. Even when I told them to contact you directly, they wouldn't listen. Quite troublesome. Before we have our meeting, I need you to do something about these two," said Sakagami.

"What're you even doing here? Beat it, or I'll kill you." I glared at Ishizaki.

"We—"

"Um…"

"About the surveillance camera being destroyed—did these two have anything to do with it?" asked Sakagami, touching his glasses.

"I did that by myself," I replied. "Come on, let's get on with it."

If Ishizaki and Albert said anything careless, they'd put the noose around their own necks. I shook them off, ignored Sakagami, and started walking to the counselor's office.

Sakagami had to suspect something was up, but he told Ishizaki and Albert to head back and followed me. "I have a general idea of what happened, based on what you said over the phone, but walk me through this once more, Ryuuen. First of all, you admit to defacing the security camera by spray-painting the lens?"

"Yeah. I did that on my own."

"Okay, one more thing. Is it true that a fight broke out between you, Ishizaki, Albert, and Ibuki?" Sakagami asked.

"Yeah, it's true. I take complete responsibility for it. I threw the first punch. They retaliated." No need to involve them in this losing battle.

"Well then, this'll be quick."

"Please wait, Ryuuen-san! We *did* have something to do with—" cried Ishizaki, who was still following us.

I kicked him. Violent outbursts before a teacher didn't really matter when you were going to drop out of school, anyway.

"Ryuuen?!" rebuked Sakagami. "What're you doing?"

"How many times do you plan on making me say it? Did the beating I gave you yesterday not satisfy you?" I spat at Ishizaki, who crouched on the floor in pain.

We'd made it to the counselor's office. I looked away from Ishizaki as we entered, leaving him and Albert outside. Time to wrap this up.

"You can add that outburst just now to whatever my penalty is," I told Sakagami.

"It seems there's a misunderstanding here, so allow me to offer some corrections," said Sakagami. "We've confirmed that there are inconsistencies in your statement."

"Huh? Hold up. Inconsistencies?"

"Based on my understanding, there's some kind of problem between you and Class D."

No way. Had Ayanokouji done something? If he reported what'd happened to the school, then this wouldn't end with me. The school

would punish Ibuki and Ishizaki, too.

"Did they file a complaint or something?" I asked.

"A complaint? No, from what I've heard, a single Class D student was also involved in destroying the security camera."

"What did you just say?" The words made no sense.

"Class D already paid the private points necessary to cover the repair. What I wanted to confirm with you was whether you wished to split the blame."

"You've gotta be screwing with me."

If you think this'll prevent me from dropping out, you're making a big mistake, Ayanokouji.

"I'm dropping out," I told Sakagami.

"There's no problem here, though. You still want to drop out, despite that?" Sakagami was no fool. He had to have figured out that something serious had gone down on the rooftop yesterday.

"That's right. I see no point in staying at this school any longer."

"I see. If that's your final decision, I can't stop you," Sakagami said, pulling out a piece of paper. "Please write your name, student ID number, and reason for withdrawal on this form."

"Just a second," I told him.

I picked up a pen, and Sakagami pulled out two more forms. "Once we finish processing your withdrawal, please deliver these to Ishizaki and Yamada."

"What? They've got nothing to do with this."

"You're certainly right. But this was their wish. They said that, should you choose to drop out of school, they would quit too. They wouldn't listen to reason."

That Ayanokouji… Had he put this ridiculous idea in those idiots' heads? He was basically holding Ishizaki and Albert hostage to prevent me from withdrawing. If I chose to drop out here and now, those two would go with me, and my own withdrawal would become meaningless. I'd be putting the cart before the horse.

"Shit."

"Personally, I would find it rather regrettable for anyone in my

class to drop out," said Sakagami, his gaze lowering to the withdrawal form in my hand. "As things stand, the matter can be resolved with a simple punishment for damaging school property. This is your first and last chance."

"What is the point of me even staying, though?" I muttered to myself.

Ayanokouji had my number. He knew I wasn't gonna cause more trouble for Sakayanagi and the other two.

"Fine. I won't drop out."

I handed the paper and pen back to Sakayanagi and left.

7.2

SOON AFTERWARD, strange rumors started spreading among the first-year students—rumors that Ryuuen Kakeru had abandoned his position as Class C's leader. That Ishizaki and the others were no longer his entourage. That he no longer talked to anyone, but spent all his time alone.

It was like looking in a mirror—a mirror of the person I'd been when I first started at this school. I wondered whether there would come a day when Ryuuen regained what he lost. I *was* sure of one thing, though. He and I were similar.

And I could still use him.

Postscript

HEY, it's been five months since last time. Syougo Kinugasa here.

To update you on what's been going on in my life, I had the atheroma that's been growing in my back for the last ten years (and got to be about seven centimeters in diameter) surgically removed. I'm glad to be rid of it, but, well…I couldn't lie on my back for a whole week. At least I'm healing up nicely.

The anime adaptation is out there now. Did you all enjoy it? I was deeply moved to see my story brought to life in a way only animation can achieve. There's been a huge increase in the number of people reading *Classroom of the Elite* since the anime came out, and I'm exceedingly grateful—especially for those of you who read the books before they were adapted. Your support allows us to keep publishing these books. Thank you all very much.

Ayanokouji seems to have settled things with Ryuuen for the time being, but that's not necessarily the end of Class C. The third semester will be a brand-new stage, involving not only the student council, but the second- and third-year students, too. Class A and Class B will be facing off, and previously minor characters will take the spotlight more often. In the near future, you'll see Ichinose and Sakayanagi's stories, as well as Katsuragi, Hirata, and others. Who will become enemies? Who will become allies? Pay close attention, and find out.

Meanwhile, I'm hard at work on the Volume 7.5, a compilation of short stories about the events of winter vacation. They'll center on Christmas, and the main story will focus on the girl featured on the next cover, and her romantic endeavors. I say "short stories", but really, Volumes 4.5 and 7.5 are books in their own right, bridging the gaps in the main story by covering the times classes aren't in session, such as spring and summer break. Please keep that in mind as you read.

And, as always, thank you very much for your continued support.

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